

Art History as Social Praxis

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# Art History as Social Praxis

*The Collected Writings of David Craven*

*Edited by*

Brian Winkenweder



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*For Paul, Laura and Brian*



History does nothing, it possesses no immense wealth, it wages no battles. It is man, real living man, who does all that, who possesses and fights; "History" is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve its own aims, history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims.

KARL MARX



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David was an impassioned world traveller who enjoyed meeting people and engaging conversations, especially over a meal with wine. I'm fairly certain that dozens of assertions, theories and ideas presented in this collection of writings first began as kernels of thought David experienced while in conversation in cafés and taverns throughout the world. I know that much of what I learned from David was imparted over a pint of beer. So, here's to you, David!

I offer special thanks to Steve Edwards for inviting me to take on this project. Steve's timing was impeccable; I read his email offering me this opportunity in the morning just before beginning a *very* long road trip from Albuquerque, New Mexico back to McMinnville, Oregon with my wife, Adrienne, and then eight-year-old son, Scott. We had just finished a week of organising and packing David's substantial library (which included several filing cabinets stuffed with handwritten reading notes and photocopies of essays) from both his home and office. During the first day's drive, I drafted a book proposal with a tentative table of contents and shot an email back to Steve. This collection of writings, save for a few additions and deletions, is that proposal.

I owe thanks to many of David's friends and colleagues who have supported me and encouraged my efforts. In particular, Donald Kuspit, whose friendship I cherish as much as his mentoring (and, I know David felt the same way); Susanne Baackman, whose home will always trigger happy memories; Richard Leslie, who has a great collection of stories about David; Shaw Smith, whose

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I had intended to write the introductory essay to this book during the month of August in 2012. However, on the fifth of that month, I became suddenly ill and spent a few days in ICU. I was diagnosed with kidney cancer, which forced me to put the project on the back burner. The tumour was surgically removed and two months after the initial diagnosis, the cancer was gone. So, there is a team of doctors to whom I owe thanks, particularly Dr. Geoffrey LaRochelle and Dr. G. Craig Kaiser.

There are many people that helped David along the way that I know he would have offered thanks to in such a collection. Near the top of the list would be the participants of the 'Theoretical Community' at Cortland College, New York: Colleen Kattau, John Ryder, Frank Hearn, Gerald Surette, Henry Steck, Peter Banner-Haley, John Marciano, Jamie Dangler, Devereaux Kennedy, and Michael Mertens. David cut his teeth on economic theory and philosophy with this group; his growth as a professor and scholar at Cortland College was a period in David's life about which he spoke fondly.

Special recognition and praise is reserved for Marit Berning, whose commitment and dedication to helping me to complete this project is much appreciated. Thank you, Marit. Without your focus and ability to chase down bibliographic minutiae, I'd still be tying up loose ends.

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## David Craven, Democratic Socialism and Art History

From the time I was around eighteen or nineteen, I knew I was a partisan of the left, a *democratic socialist* if you like. My views on political economy emerged from a quite concrete observation that I still find valid about the South (and indeed about the USA more generally): only an egalitarian process involving the wholesale structural *re-distribution* of land-holding and wealth, coupled with a sharply graduated income tax nationally, would even come close to solving the economic underside of institutionalized racial discrimination that remains a tragic everyday fact of the US.

DAVID CRAVEN<sup>1</sup>



David Lee Craven (Distinguished Professor, University of New Mexico) passed away suddenly on 11 February 2012. An art historian who displayed rare intellect and industry, in his lifetime Craven wrote more than fifteen monographs and exhibition catalogues on such diverse topics as Diego Rivera, Abstract Expressionism, Rudolf Baranik and art associated with Latin American revolutions. In addition to being a dedicated professor and inspirational lecturer, he published over 150 essays, articles and reviews in such academic journals as *Art History*, *Kritische Berichte* and *Third Text* and mass-circulation publications such as *Arts Magazine* and *Tema Celeste*; further, his writings have appeared in dozens of anthologies, encyclopaedias and newspapers.<sup>2</sup>

The essays collected here represent the broad range of issues Professor Craven tackled in his thirty-plus years as an art historian. These selections assemble, in one place, many of his most incisive essays which appeared in a wide range of forums. Moreover, this collection includes several unpublished

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1 Craven and Winkenweder 2011, p. 127.

2 A survey of Craven's writings that extends beyond the scope of this introductory essay can be found at *Third Text Online* (Winkenweder 2013).

statements and essays including a few that were initiated while he was a post-doctorate at Princeton in 1980. Likewise, various obscure pieces, such as the op-ed 'Perspective: Corporate Capitalism in South Africa', are included to punctuate Craven's knowledge of and concern for the political and economic realities of the developing world. Although not exhaustive, this collection of writings charts the development of Craven's voice as an unorthodox Marxist who applied a non-normative application of historical materialism to the study of modern art.

This collection begins with Craven's first published essay, one he wrote as a doctoral student – 'Mondrian De-Mythologized: Towards a Newer Virgil'. It offered a stark repudiation of Clement Greenberg's formalist approach to art criticism.<sup>3</sup> This initiates a subject Craven examined repeatedly throughout his career – the tense relationship between one's process in making art (or one's methods as a scholar) and one's political situation in a consumer-based economy. Craven zeroed in on the nature of the art object as a hand-made example of craftsmanship signifying a form of labour, quite literally 'Art Work', that can at times carry with it a contradictory set of denotations and connotations regarding the art work's form as a reified commodity fetish and the art work's content as a critique of the status quo's hegemony. The contradictions implicit within avant-garde art production include making works that often serve multiple functions and institutions simultaneously; its non-utilitarian nature (or purposeless purpose) repudiates the scientific empiricism of corporate culture. And yet, it exploits the myth of *laissez-faire* 'freedom' since art works hypostatise into objects of speculation for venture capitalists. Although avant-garde art tends to resist or question middle-class consumption, it also benefits directly from the repressive logic of late capitalism. That is, an artist's pay for her/his labour (art work) requires a system of patronage that extends the speculative world of acquiring and trading investments to include hand-made, non-utilitarian, aesthetically-endowed art work as investment instruments (the artist as alchemist). But, of course, not all works of art produce a 'good return': some gain, while others lose. Since the art market is neither egalitarian nor meritocratic, but rather resembles an oligopoly (few sellers) serving an oligopsony (few buyers), it facilitates the concentration of wealth in the hands of an increasingly smaller percentage of the world's population.

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3 Greenberg 1966, pp. 100–10. This essay is Greenberg's most cogent explanation of his formalist theory of 'purity' which demands 'flatness' in order for a painting to qualify as 'modernist'. Craven returned frequently to Greenberg's writings to demonstrate the ideological and psychological tensions that are at stake when writing art criticism as a scholar on the political left.

More precisely, wealth consolidates in the administrative ruling classes of CEOs and CFOs (the pool from which the 'trustees' for cultural institutions and other non-profit institutions are drawn) and the perpetually merging, multi-national corporate conglomerations they control. The corporate patronage system that funds much programming in the world's art museums often co-opts the artist's social critique and uses 'fine art' to help promote the corporate 'brand' through art's generic association by the mainstream public with luxury and refined taste more than from a desire to help artists 'shock the bourgeoisie'.<sup>4</sup> These competing interests can simultaneously reduce the avant-garde artist's shock to mere spectacle just as the artist's negative protest offers an affirmative glimpse of the possibility of human emancipation and self-realisation. Here lies the contradictory position of *engagé* artists: they must reconcile their economic reality with the desire to make, show and sell art that exposes and negates the horrifying conditions of social and economic inequity.

This contradiction, for Craven, did not result in his blind acceptance of a profit-driven consumerist model (under-regulated cycles of boom and bust driven by planned obsolescence and decreased wages) but rather offered an opportunity to suggest modes of resistance to help realise increasingly egalitarian socio-economic models. The incrementalism implied by the phrase 'uneven historical development' recognises that while capitalism has improved the living conditions for some, it does so through an exploitation of labour power and an inequitable distribution of the 'surplus-value' it generates.<sup>5</sup>

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4 Consider, for instance, the Metropolitan Museum's educational programmes made possible by the Campbell's Soup Company for *Regarding Warhol: Fifty Artists, Sixty Years* (18 September–31 December 2012): <http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2012/regarding-warhol>. Bank of America, sponsor of the Tate Modern's *Roy Lichtenstein: A Retrospective* (21 February–27 May 2013), uses patronage as a part of their global public relations strategy, reported Melanie Gerlis in the *Art Newspaper* (April 2013, Issue 245): '[Rena] De Sisto [Bank of America's arts and culture executive] says that Bank of America Merrill Lynch's exhibition sponsorship has become "more global in nature", because it has "grown as our company has grown, not only in terms of the financial support but in terms of the geographies we reach"' (<http://old.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Corporate-sponsors-play-it-safe/29144>).

5 Or as Leon Trotsky wrote in his introduction to Marx's *Capital*: 'But if commodities are exchanged for each other according to the quantity of labour invested in them, how does inequality come out of equality? Marx solved this puzzle by exposing the peculiar nature of one of the commodities, which lies at the basis of all other commodities: namely, labour power. The owner of the means of production, the capitalist, buys labour power. Like all other commodities, it is evaluated according to the quantity of the labour invested in it, i.e., of those means of subsistence which are necessary for the survival and the reproduction of the worker. But, the consumption of that commodity – labour power – consists of work, i.e., the creation

Therefore, the scholar-*engagé's* struggle is to help produce conditions that, if only gradually, enable more and more labourers to earn a growing share of the surplus value their labour power produces. This prevailing concern guides Craven's social praxis as an art historian who treated scholarship as a partisan affair and believed that one's research should promote a more socially just world. Such political motivation developed into a nimble critique of the hegemony of internationalised neoliberal capitalism and its diminished regard for the visual arts both as a means and an end.

Unwavering in his enthusiasm, Craven believed art – both its production and consumption – served the greater good and sought examples to corroborate his convictions. The essays collected here reveal Craven's lifelong commitment to exposing interstices between Western and non-Western cultures by researching the reciprocating influences between First- and Third-World artists without recourse to the implicit, essentialist hierarchies of 'dependency theory'.<sup>6</sup> The objective of this collection, therefore, is to show the range and versatility of David Craven's praxis as a 'democratic socialist' art historian who assessed the essential role the visual arts play in imagining solutions for constructing more just and equitable societies. It is fitting then, that this collection concludes with a previously unpublished list Craven compiled that systematically notes 50 different conceptions of art and reveals, above all else, the erudition and range Craven had accumulated as regards the history, theory and practice of the art of the twentieth century.

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of new values. The quantity of these values is greater than those which the worker himself receives and which he expends for his upkeep. The capitalist buys labour power in order to exploit it. It is this exploitation which is the source of inequality'. Trotsky 1939, pp. 7–8.

- 6 According to Vincent Ferraro, '[d]ependency theory developed in the late 1950s under the guidance of the Director of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America, Raul Prebisch. Prebisch and his colleagues were troubled by the fact that economic growth in the advanced industrialized countries did not necessarily lead to growth in the poorer countries. Indeed, their studies suggested that economic activity in the richer countries often led to serious economic problems in the poorer countries. Such a possibility was not predicted by neoclassical theory, which had assumed that economic growth was beneficial to all (Pareto optimal) even if the benefits were not always equally shared. Prebisch's initial explanation for the phenomenon was very straightforward: poor countries exported primary commodities to the rich countries who then manufactured products out of those commodities and sold them back to the poorer countries. The "Value Added" by manufacturing a usable product always cost more than the primary products used to create those products. Therefore, poorer countries would never be earning enough from their export earnings to pay for their imports'. Ferraro 2008, p. 58.

Although Craven spent most of his career at the University of New Mexico, he enjoyed teaching stints at such institutions as Humboldt Universität zu Berlin as the 2007 Rudolf Arnheim Professor of Art History and at Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Collegium Budapest (Institute for Advanced Study, Hungary), Trinity College (Dublin, Ireland) and the University of Leeds as well as Duke and SUNY-Cortland. An accomplished multilingualist, he studied French at the Université of Montréal, Spanish at the University of Havana (Cuba) and German at the Goethe Institute in Munich and Düsseldorf.

Craven was among the first art historians trained in the United States to apply and extend concepts developed by post-war continental philosophers (specifically Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault) regarding subjectivity, semiotics, myth and 'power/knowledge' relationships. Likewise, Craven was among the first art historians to fully explore the ethical implications of aesthetic theories developed by philosophers associated with the Frankfurt School (namely Karl Korsch, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas). Simultaneously, Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, Georg Lukács's theory of class consciousness and Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogical methods informed Craven's application of historical materialism. Although Craven held such seminal art historians as Heinrich Wölfflin, Frederick Antal, Erwin Panofsky and Arnold Hauser as essential to his intellectual formation, it was a subsequent generation of scholars – Meyer Schapiro, Dore Ashton and John Berger – who provided Craven with a Marxist-inflected methodology as a sharp analytical tool for exposing inextricable links between artistic production in particular with the alienating demands of labour power in general. Their work validated and broadened Craven's reading of such Latin American and Caribbean theorists as José Carlos Mariátegui, C.L.R. James and Gerardo Mosquera. Following their model, Craven sought to advance the discipline of art history beyond the limitations of connoisseurship, iconology and formal analysis to embrace the possibilities of a 'new art history' in which art serves as a barometer measuring the health of society. Art history, a relatively young discipline, is limited in scope, and therefore, long resistant to encroachment from other disciplines of the social sciences and humanities: 'Art history was founded by Wölfflin and Riegl on the principle that formal analysis was key to the study'.<sup>7</sup>

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7 Rees and Borzello 1988, p. 7. Bibliography on the tension between traditional art history and 'new' art history is extensive and need not be fully reviewed here. The debate's zenith was in 1995 when *The Art Bulletin* published a series, included in all four issues of the 77th volume, entitled 'A Range of Critical Perspectives', that assessed the persistent grip of formalism on

The son of an economics professor and a nurse (both of whom had been orphaned), Craven grew up in Oxford, Mississippi during the 1950s and 60s. As a young adult, he was actively involved in the Civil Rights movement and volunteered for the George McGovern campaign for president in 1972. After attending Ole Miss as an undergraduate, Craven studied art history at Vanderbilt in the early 1970s; his Masters thesis offered an original analysis of the trial between *Whistler v. Ruskin* as a concise episode that characterised the alienating conditions of the modern artist. Craven declared: 'Art mirrors the gross disparity in wealth distribution and reflects the tasteless commercialization of society'.<sup>8</sup>

At this time, a CIA-instigated, US-sponsored military coup ousted Latin America's first democratically elected Marxist politician, Salvadore Allende – a founding member of the Socialist Party in Chile. Allende won a three-way presidential election, after unsuccessful attempts in the 1950s and 60s, with 36.3 percent of the vote. Ironically, the Nixon government considered Allende a threat to 'democracy' and installed the General Augusto Pinochet on 11 September 1973 – three years after Allende's popular election. Under this version of US-endorsed 'democracy', Pinochet ruled for seventeen years as a brutal dictator. These events left an indelible impression on a young David Craven, who became increasingly committed to a progressive ideology based on a radical, if naïve, hope for social justice and a more equitable distribution of the world's resources: 'my young man's anger soon turned into a permanently disturbed sense of the world order everywhere'.<sup>9</sup>

Six years later, in July 1979, the violent ousting of the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua by the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) occurred just as Craven completed his dissertation on the painter and art theorist Charles Biederman at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Craven originally intended to earn a doctorate in seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish art history with Francis Huemer. But, while there, he discovered a psychosocially engaged scholar, Donald Kuspit, who had studied philosophy with Theodor Adorno. Kuspit exposed Craven to the social history of art as a methodology. This method, informed by the theories of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, seeks to contextualise artists and art works within socio-economic and psychological frameworks that reveal the cultural fragmentation inherent within base/super-structure dynamics. This method, then, assesses the potential moral utility

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art history. In the fourth issue, Carlo Ginzburg declared 'Today some art historians regard interdisciplinarity as either a remedy for the alleged narrow-mindedness and conservatism of that discipline, or, alternatively, as a weapon against that discipline'. Ginzburg, 1995, p. 534.

8 Craven 1974, p. 61.

9 Craven and Dimitrakaki 2011, pp. 113–14.

of the non-utilitarian, hand-made art work as a repository for contemplative pause: the humanising respite of looking at genuine creative human expression, whether one's own or that of another's (leisure in its purest essence), as opposed to the artificial, motivated come-ons of pictorial advertising and logo-based marketing (leisure transformed into labour masquerading as 'escapist' entertainment). While working on his dissertation, Craven developed a dialectical theory of the arts that attempted to reconcile the perceptual and the conceptual imperatives of reception through recourse to both the artist's and the viewer's status in society regarding class, ethnicity (race) and gender. In doing so, Craven sought to reconcile the Cartesian riddle of the split between mind and body through recourse to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Roland Barthes's semiology.

Craven's wide-ranging scholarship resulted in his recognition as 'an acknowledged authority in two distinct sub-fields: Post-War US Art and Latin American Art ... Craven ranks among the most empirically informed and theoretically incisive art historians in the world'.<sup>10</sup> The diversity of his scholarly investigations is indicated here by the organisation of the collected essays into five sections, each of which is presented chronologically: 1) Artists, 2) Art Critics, 3) Critical Theory, 4) Latin America and 5) Abstract Expressionism. Undaunted by prudence and convention, Craven argued with verve and conviction, providing insightful if nuanced readings of artistic production as a negative critique of mass culture. He refused to conform his thinking to the prevailing dictates of formalism and the stylised conventions of connoisseurship; indeed, the essays collected here demonstrate Craven's belief that in order to fully understand art, particularly that of the twentieth century, one must examine its capacity to transcend national boundaries and visually communicate ideas free from the need to translate from one language to another. Visual art's language may not be 'universal' but rarely requires a textual supplement before viewers (who speak any of the world's languages) can experience it. However, in order to fully apprehend any work of art's significance and meaning, its political, historical and economic context must be examined. Although Craven believed formal analysis was a primary skill all art historians must hone, he resisted reducing art merely to its physical appearance and archival provenance. Formalist art history's reification of art objects de-contextualises them by ignoring the power art has to communicate across national, cultural, class and linguistic boundaries. Ideally, for Craven, art promotes the construction of new and diverse 'alternative modernisms' in which uneven historical development is mitigated

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10 Eisenman 2011, p. 5.

by a far more egalitarian global structure. Craven believed art could help individuals dialogically interrogate a world order dictated by the rapacious, short-term vision of multinational corporations and their capacity to establish and maintain as normative the dehumanising and alienating conditions for labouring consumers throughout the world – both in developed and undeveloped nations.

## 1 Artists

From the phenomenological view advanced by Merleau-Ponty, formalism (the most notorious species of phenomenism) is a perceptual impossibility, aside from being conceptually implausible, because it presupposes that you can essentially know an object *aside* from the particular way in which you see it, the peculiar context in which you perceive it, the specific cultural mediation by which you have arrived at a concept of art with which to look at it, and so forth.

DAVID CRAVEN<sup>11</sup>



The first section focuses on Craven's writings about artists and begins with his first publication: 'Mondrian Demythologised: Towards a Newer Virgil'. This essay appeared in two locations, the University of North Carolina's inaugural issue of *Journal of Fine Arts* and a few months later in *Praxis: A Journal of Radical Perspectives on the Arts*. Even if both of these versions suffered from meagre distribution and indexing opportunities, this initial publication introduced a brash new voice as one not intimidated by the titans of his field. In it, Craven admonished Clement Greenberg for a 'misinterpretation' of Piet Mondrian. Where Greenberg emphasised Mondrian's concentration on 'medium' purification, Craven stressed Mondrian's emphasis on the converse, the artist's search for 'social' purification.

This essay affords Craven his first opportunity to cite Karl Marx in print. Drawing parallels between Mondrian's theory and the Arts and Crafts philosophy of William Morris, Craven claims: '[Morris] defined art as a human

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11 Craven 1986, p. 50.



expression of joy in labour, and thus was the first to apply Marx's theory of labour value to art, he believed in an "all pervading art" possible only when society has been sufficiently ameliorated ... While Morris contended that the new art would be an expression of improved working conditions, Mondrian believed that improved working conditions would be a result of his new art.<sup>12</sup> In this short essay, many of the key scholars Craven would cite throughout his career make an appearance, in particular Meyer Schapiro, Theodor Adorno, and Donald Kuspit. More significantly, Craven displayed a well-honed predilection for expressing nuanced distinctions and polyvalent analysis:

To look at [Mondrian's] work in a multifaceted manner is to see far more than at first sight one is capable of seeing – an emphatic political statement; a visual analogue for an abstract world; a panegyric about technological accomplishments; a naïve belief in the perfectibility of the future; a delight in a mechanized environment, and also the highly personal vision of a quixotic figure.<sup>13</sup>

Such careful enumeration of an artist's oeuvre's characteristics typifies Craven's rhetorical precision.

Craven's approach to questioning received wisdom steers him towards a highly original and carefully parsed reading of Charles Biederman's theory of perception and 'visual knowledge'.<sup>14</sup> In the excerpt from his dissertation published here, Craven found fault with the artist/theorist for establishing an untenable absolutist aesthetic:

Biederman's study [*Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge*] must be one of the most sustained examples in art history of the teleological fallacy – the assumption of a final end toward which all art is consciously striving ... Biederman's failure to avoid the neutral style fallacy – the belief in a zero degree subjectivity – leads him to assess other art on the basis of an 'objective' standard contradicted by his own emphasis on the subjective dimension of perception in art.<sup>15</sup>

While Craven appreciated Biederman's theoretically sophisticated painting, he avoided the trap of remaining spellbound by an artist's explanation of his work.

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12 Craven 1977, p. 16.

13 Craven 1977, p. 28.

14 Biederman 1948.

15 Craven 1979, p. 24.

Herein lies Craven's greatest virtue as a scholar and critic – a refusal to accept at face-value the claims made for art by both artists and critics.

The tenuous and ill-defined relationship between perception and conception consumed Craven's thought during the early 1980s. Not only did it underscore his analysis of Biederman, it also offered him a way to contemplate the influence of Marcel Duchamp on artistic developments during the second half of the twentieth century. The deft dialectics between art and aesthetics on display in the heretofore unpublished essay Craven began writing while conducting research for his dissertation characterises his dedication to a razor-edged precision in expression. In this essay, Craven explored the relationship between conceptual and perceptual experiences in which neither is ascendant and both are integral to any possible understanding of art, especially in regards to the development of conceptual art after World War Two. For Craven, the paradoxical fact that concepts always already require percepts reveals lacunae between modernist conceptions of art and the somatic act of constructing objects by hand. And, the disalienated labour of producing 'handmade' art works, in contrast to the intellectual and indifferent 'choice' of creating readymades, frequently reappeared in Craven's writing, as the economic relationship between labour and the production of art was an abiding concern. Emphasising Duchamp's readymades as a means for questioning the uniqueness of the art work beyond its ontological 'aura' as described by Walter Benjamin in 'Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Craven revealed that the readymade offers the experience of art as a Venn diagram in which 'idea' (conception) and 'experience' (perception) overlap.<sup>16</sup> And, if this is so, then Duchamp is regrettably and profoundly misunderstood by art critics and historians during the late twentieth century:

In using readymades to define art as its context, Duchamp undermined any critical approach that would assess his works as concepts knowable aside from the way they are experienced. Most discussions of Duchamp's artworks are self-refuting; they acknowledge a readymade to be its context and then paradoxically disallow this context by proclaiming

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16 Benjamin 1968 [1936], pp. 217–52. Extending Craven's invocation of 'aura', Walter Benjamin wrote: 'To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose "sense of the universal equality of things" has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction. Thus is manifested in the field of perception what in the theoretical sphere is noticeable in the increasing importance of statistics. The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope, as much for thinking as for perception'. Benjamin, 1968, p. 223.

the readymade a 'pure' idea. Standard views of this work result in a-historicism which does not recognize itself, because it evokes history to name what it fails to locate historically. As such, these critical approaches to the readymades are equally un-self-critical about the context of their own constitutive acts. Just as a readymade is largely its context, so criticism always depends on its context. No one understood better the contextually consummative act of viewing art, than Duchamp, who continually addressed the auratic encasement of art and who spoke of the conceptual 'incompleteness' of art.<sup>17</sup>

This dialectical hair-splitting may seem to be the tortured analysis of obtuse academicism, but Craven was aware that standard art critical responses emphasising the a-historicism of the readymade underscore a failure to acknowledge Duchamp's implicit critique of the economic context framing the experience of the art object as purely retinal and therefore detached from the hegemonic structures organising human relationships. If Craven faulted Duchamp, it was because the artist is ineffective in offering a social critique that helps spur the communal fostering of equity. As a result, Craven turned to Antonio Gramsci's articulation of repressive hegemony through recourse to Robert Smithson's critique of Duchampian aesthetics to demonstrate art's capacity for dialogical and interrogative confrontations with neoliberal capitalism.

In his essay-length book review of Robert Hobb's *Robert Smithson's Sculpture*, Craven takes the critic to task for attenuating Smithson's acerbic critique of industrial capitalism by occluding his oeuvre with a populist accessibility that obscures, or worse denies, its implicit negative dialectics. Craven criticised Hobbs for failing to recognise that Smithson's 'collaboration with American corporations' was a switch-agent's ploy to undermine the pragmatic logic of profiteering whereby 'corporate patronage is first and foremost an ideological front to give public legitimacy to the exploitative interests of the monopoly capital sector'.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, Craven asserts that Smithson's partnership with corporate interests 'was not to create "liberated art", but to disclose how, within the present system, totally free art is hardly possible. Thus, the most emancipatory art is that which explodes the myth of art's autonomy, in order to address the political strictures confronting all contemporary artists – strictures which must be overcome before freer art is possible'.<sup>19</sup> And, it is this 'freer art'

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17 Craven 1980a [unpublished manuscript].

18 Craven, 1983, p. 491.

19 Ibid.

that Craven sought to locate, describe and promote that defined his life work. Determined to encounter and study artists confronting the political realities of their day, Craven sought clarity in expression to help articulate and disseminate the power of such art. Always careful to never foreclose the future, Craven explored the impact of art when it asks 'what if ...?' especially as it related to the emancipation of the proletariat.

Early in his career, Craven engaged the art and ideas of Hans Haacke, with whom he maintained a friendship, sharing many of the same ideas and beliefs. Most importantly, Craven declared 'Haacke's work is an acute formal affirmation of the unavoidable political nature, however various its manifestations, of *all* art'.<sup>20</sup> And, it is this supposition that underscores Craven's writing. For Craven, art is always circumscribed by its political context which can oscillate between periods of stability and instability, conservatism and progressivism, centralised dictatorships and populist democracies. As a result, works of art hold out hope and offer optimism through dialogical resonance between interrogative 'what ifs' and declarative 'possibilities'. This view is consistent with Antonio Gramsci's demand for a 'new culture' and not merely a 'new art', especially as regards the auratic relationships between perception and conception, or form and content:

To be precise, perhaps it cannot even be said that the struggle is for a new artistic content apart from form because content cannot be considered abstractly, in separation from form. To fight for a new art would mean to fight to create new individual artists which is absurd since artists cannot be created artificially. One must speak of a struggle for a new culture, that is, for a new moral life that cannot but be intimately connected to a new intuition of life, until it becomes a new way of feeling and seeing reality, and, therefore, a world intimately ingrained in 'possible artists' and 'possible works of art'.<sup>21</sup>

Ever vigilant against overt, instrumental didacticism, Craven took to heart Gramsci's aphorism: 'Art is educative in so far as it is art, but not in so far as it is "educative art"'.<sup>22</sup> Again, this subtle distinction is crucial if one is to understand Craven's theory of the visual arts as a catalyst for engineering social justice. Careful to avoid teleological fallacies, or describe with detail how an egalitarian

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<sup>20</sup> Craven 1987, p. 56.

<sup>21</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 98.

<sup>22</sup> Gramsci 1971, p. 107.

society might function, Craven's unorthodox materialist conception of history contrasts with vulgar Marxism and its corresponding visual culture of 'social realism'. Gramsci's admonition against the propagandising aspect of 'educative art' relates directly to Bakhtin's dialogical imagination. Opposed to regulated didacticism, Craven emphasised an open-ended, indeterminant polyglossia in his writings.<sup>23</sup> To borrow Bakhtin's tropes, Craven endorsed the spontaneity and danger of the carnival against the formalised ritual of the church – the harlequin's open-ended pranks of political resistance enacted in the public sphere were preferred to the priest's hermeneutic theology legitimising political control behind cloistered walls.<sup>24</sup>

Causes and effects, in Craven's application of historical materialism, refuse to be predetermined (or teleologically predictable) because a socially just future can neither be pre-ordained nor foreclosed, since the conclusion of the historical struggle between the classes, ethnicities (races) and genders remains perpetually deferred. Within the context of a centre/periphery dichotomy, equity remains a mythical ideal obscured by a neoliberal doctrine that pretends to iron out economic disparity between industrialised and developing nations in the name of deregulation. Craven writes:

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23 Bakhtin, 1981, p. 431. From the glossary of *Dialogical Imagination*: 'POLYGLOSSIA: The simultaneous presence of two or more national languages interacting within a single cultural system (Bakhtin's two historical models are ancient Rome and the Renaissance)'.

24 See Bakhtin 1984, pp. 196–277. Chapter 3 ('Popular-Festive Forms and Images in Rabelais') is particularly instructive. Bakhtin's comparison of 'The Play of the Bower' to Rabelais's Fourth Book of Pantagruel highlights and compresses many issues critical to Craven's thought: 'This utopian element acquires here, as in all popular-festive utopias, a sharply defined material form. Freedom and equality are expressed in familiar blows, a coarse bodily contact. Beatings are, as we have seen, a tangible equivalent of improper speech. In the example given the ritual is nuptial; during the night the full physical contact of bride and bridegroom will be realized, the act of conception will be consummated, the reproductive force will triumph. The atmosphere of the celebration's central act spreads over all and everything; the cuffing, so to speak, radiates from it. Further, as in all popular-festive forms of that type, the utopian element has a gay character (the cuffing is light, playful). Finally, and this is important, this utopia is enacted without footlights; it is presented within life itself. True, the scene is strictly limited by time, the time of the banquet, but during that period there are no footlights, no separation of participants and spectators. Everybody participates. While the usual world order is suspended, the new utopian order which has come to replace it is sovereign and embraces all' (pp. 264–5).

Haacke incisively conveys the dependency of much contemporary art on a corporate system that ... systematically plunders Africa and Latin America in order to finance, among other things, its increasingly powerful hold on the Western art world ... Few artists other than Haacke make art of such relentless breadth that connects contemporary artistic developments in the West with the continual economic underdevelopment of the Third World.<sup>25</sup>

This disparity, and much of contemporary art's feeble response to it, drove Craven to seek artists and aesthetic situations that helped him to articulate why ameliorating such abuse would benefit all of humanity.

Idiosyncratic and counterintuitive, Craven's idealism was tempered by an understanding that social justice will never spontaneously arise given the as yet un-resolvable realities of uneven historical development. This deferred conclusion is certainly an unsatisfactory endpoint to Craven's political analysis. It permits a rhetorical dodge whereby Craven's negative critique of neoliberal economic realities does not provide the people of the world, let alone the world's artists (or art historians), a reliable means for sustained self-actualisation. But, this does not mean that Craven did not hold out hope that class conflict could be resolved eventually and an equitable distribution of the world's ample resources could render obsolete the current Pareto optimal structure of 'sweat shop' labour securing wealth and leisure for a privileged few.

Wary of mass cultural populism, Craven can be accused of academic obscurantism by consistently teasing out subtle distinctions and clarifications between various political and economic abstractions regarding one's subjectivity. Such prose is not easily understood by those without advanced academic training. Craven, however, hoped that his political theories would encourage others to adopt a progressive social praxis too, so that, slowly over time, aided in part by his own writing, teaching and activism, oppressed subjects could discover and practice their humanity freed from the dehumanising anxiety of alienation. Determined to avoid the label of 'Armchair Socialist', Craven remained a political activist throughout his life and contributed his time and resources to numerous progressive institutions advancing civil rights throughout the world.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, as a professor, Craven tried to emulate Paulo Freire's *Ped-*

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<sup>25</sup> Craven 1987, p. 58.

<sup>26</sup> For instance, in the summer of 2011, Craven was in Nicaragua as part of a 12-member team (linked to *Nicaragua Network*) investigating US Government intervention in the presidential elections. From there, he went to Honduras as a Human Rights Observer for

*agogy of the Oppressed*: 'a pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity'.<sup>27</sup> Granted, Craven taught in higher education, but the bulk of his career was spent at the University of New Mexico, which enrolls a very high percentage of Latino/a and Native American students, some of whom enrolled in Craven's classes and went on to productive careers in the visual arts.

This approach to cultural analysis led Craven to move beyond mere 'new art history' to a sustained and incisive scholarship that championed artists who were traditionally overlooked and eventually forgotten. Perhaps the best example of this was his support and promotion of the work of the New York-based artist Norman Lewis. In the early 1990s, Craven was a guest-curator at the Tate Modern in Liverpool for the exhibit *Mythmaking: Abstract Expressionism from the U.S.*, and insisted that Lewis be included, even though few were even aware of this African-American artist's existence, let alone his participation in the New York School. Committed to a post-colonialist analysis, Craven championed Lewis not as a 'Modern Man' but rather as a 'Contemporary Man':

On the one hand, the non-Eurocentric artworks of Abstract Expressionism concerned cultural heterogeneity, polycentric identity, and artistic hybridity, all traits now associated more with post-colonial art than with mainstream modernism. In writing about the achievement of the New York school, Harold Rosenberg introduced the concept of the 'Contemporary Man', which relates more closely to the art produced by Lewis during this period ... The post-1945 theory of Contemporary Man, with its multicultural practices, multilateral sense of time, and multilingual articulation of place, was a salient attribute of Lewis's art in particular and much of Abstract Expressionism in general from the 1940s on. Ironically, when these artists used the term 'modern man', it did not consistently signify for them what it did for mainstream apologists.<sup>28</sup>

In the beginning of his publishing career, Craven offered exegetical readings of individual artists or critics. Invariably, these analyses emphasised a negative critique of the historical conditions of the labouring classes. This abiding concern soon transformed into an examination of how artists respond to the

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the Alliance for Global Justice in the role of a 'shield' between student protestors and the military on the second anniversary of that country's June 28 military coup.

27 Freire 1972, p. 30.

28 Craven 1998, pp. 51–60.

global hegemony of neoliberal institutions (multi-national corporations, first-world governments that coddle them and the US-led war machine that protects them).

## 2 Critics

[F]ormal values are actually the most significant channels of art. By realizing a genuinely personal style, the artist humanises the medium through what Ortega [y Gasset] has incompletely labelled 'dehumanised' means. In such a situation the artist is interpreted as a rebel against the anachronistic condition of the world endorsed by society. As such he becomes a reformer without a programme, an architect without a blueprint. The directness of his appeal, however, resides in the degree to which he re-humanises style.

DAVID CRAVEN<sup>29</sup>



Craven's practice of a meta-art criticism enabled him to explore the primary documents associated with such key episodes in the history of art criticism as John Ruskin's harsh, public excoriation of Whistler in *Flors Clavigera*, Thomas Hess's editorial steering of *Artnews* towards Abstract Expressionism, Meyer Schapiro's original use of Marxist thought, John Berger's landmark BBC series and corresponding book *Ways of Seeing*. Through it all, Craven often invoked Clement Greenberg's influential essentialism as a dialectical foil with which to parry. The ironically-titled essay 'Clement Greenberg and the "Triumph" of Western Art' from the early 1990s begins with the same hypothetical conversation Craven imagined occurring between Greenberg and Bertrand Russell that served as the introduction to his late 1970s essay on Mondrian and modern painting. Craven concludes his essay on Greenberg with an optimistic claim for the future of Latin America in general and its diverse cultures in particular as 'part of the larger project to re-conquer the right to dream of society in new ways – ways that fly in the face of the current empirical data about Latin Amer-

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29 Craven 1977/78 (unpublished postscript included in this collection).



ica'.<sup>30</sup> This idealistic dream for a society without exploitation guided Craven's analysis of the role art can play in such a social transformation. Moreover, this optimism countered Greenberg's orthodox formalism which advocated for a concept of taste that is empirical, objective and gains universal consensus over time. In contrast, Craven demonstrated how Greenberg's self-serving theory of modern art required an ethnocentric arrogance that both submitted to the hegemonic forces compelling uniformity in thought and suppressed art's potential to awaken the lonely, crowded public sphere.

This essay, sandwiched between two others about Meyer Schapiro, can be seen as the fulcrum upon which Craven's unorthodox Marxist methodology turns and comes to the forefront in his rhetoric. Craven's study of Schapiro resulted in a friendship between the young Marxist scholar and the renowned American art historian. Schapiro gave Craven access to many personal papers and artefacts and consented to a lengthy interview process with him. Subsequently, in 1994, Craven used these unpublished resources while guest-editing a special edition of the *Oxford Art Journal* devoted to Meyer Schapiro's legacy. His contribution to the issue, 'Meyer Schapiro, Karl Korsch, and the Emergence of Critical Theory', offered critical insight into Craven's conceptualisation of a non-normative, unorthodox Marxism. It provided him the opportunity to carefully delineate his synthetic equivocations between the thesis of empirical formalism and the antithesis of historical forces. It is here that Craven first begins to carefully parse differences between 'unorthodox Marxism' which is understood as a synonym for 'historical materialism', and 'vulgar Marxism' which is understood as a synonym for 'dialectical materialism'.<sup>31</sup>

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30 Craven 1994a, p. 9.

31 The knottiest issues of Marxism, in which numerous schools of thought offer competing solutions, stem from an array of diverse and contradictory interpretations of Marx's and Engels's writings. Given that much of Marx's writing remained unfinished in his lifetime, it is clear that neither Marxism nor socialism can be codified as a monolithic theory and corresponding social praxis: '[E]ven for partisans on the left an unavoidable gap opens between Marx and every Marxist effort to "complete" an incomplete mode of inquiry constantly subject to modification at each new historical juncture. In the end, Marx was a systematic thinker, but he left no system of thought' (Craven 2008, p. 302). To this end, Craven did have his own critics, perhaps most tersely by Gen Doy: 'Craven states that dialectical materialism "is a profoundly *non*-dialectical form of Marxism" with an essentialist understanding of history. The early Marx and Engels produced much more fruitful writings than the "later Marx and Engels", believes Craven'. Doy lists a few more beliefs she intuitively Craven held and ultimately proclaims: 'I do not have the space here to repudiate in detail all of Craven's mistaken assertions in the detail they deserve' (Doy

Despite its potential for confusion, this distinction separates the dialectical method from Stalin's version of Marxism. Although both sides share a commitment to socialism, Craven cautions against the orthodoxy of 'dialectical materialism' (a term coined by Plekhanov and codified as a 'closed teleological system' by Stalin) as a form of 'empirical, concrete analysis' which relies on 'economic reductionism'.<sup>32</sup> Craven argues that dialectical materialism advocates for transforming a 'reified dialectics into a purported "law of nature", all of which not only imparted closure to the whole but also situated humanity in a relatively resigned, largely *non*-dialectical relation to a course of history subsequently deemed "inevitable".<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Craven consistently resisted such narrow conceptions of history. He routinely emphasised that Alexandre Kojève's post-Hegelian (and pre-Fukuyama) notions of a pre-ordained course of human history ignores Friedrich Engels's warning that '[t]he materialist method is converted into its opposite if, instead of being used as a *guiding thread in historical research*, it is made to serve as a *ready-cut pattern on which to tailor historical facts*'.<sup>34</sup> In the aforementioned essay, Craven outlined Meyer Schapiro's friendship with and indebtedness to Karl Korsch, whom Craven proclaimed to be 'the least famous of the major Marxist theoreticians of the first half of the 20th century'.<sup>35</sup> Korsch's theory of subjective preconditions for revolutionary change, discussed in his 1923 book *Marxism and Philosophy*, became a foundational text for the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. Craven quoted liberally from Korsch's essay 'Leading Principles of Marxism: A Restatement':

The Marxist critique of the development concept of bourgeois social science starts from a recognition of the illusory character of that 'so-called historical evolution' according to which 'the last stage [of history] regards the preceding stages as being only preliminary to itself and therefore can only look at them one-sidedly' ... This critical consciousness breaks the magic spell of the metaphysical 'law' of evolution. From a valid *a priori* axiom, it is reduced to a working hypothesis which must be empirically verified in each case ... Bourgeois society may contain the relations of earlier societies in a further developed form. It may [however] contain them as well in degenerate, travestied forms ... It likewise contains within

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1998, p. 94). Craven's emphasis on 'both/and' analyses contradicts Doy's assertions, but her 'repudiations' underscore the open-ended nature of this 'incomplete mode of inquiry'.

32 Craven 1994b, p. 42. See also McLellan 1976, pp. 84–6.

33 Ibid. (Craven's italics).

34 Craven 1994b, p. 44 (Craven's italics). Engels 1973, 87.

35 Craven 1994b, p. 42.

itself the germs of future developments of present society, though by no means their complete discrimination.<sup>36</sup>

This passage was of significance for Craven, as it also appears in his essay 'Clement Greenberg and the "Triumph" of Western Art'.<sup>37</sup>

As stated above, this discussion of Greenberg begins with Craven recycling a conversation he imagined occurring between Russell and Greenberg – a rhetorical ruse to expose shortcomings in Greenberg's reductive, formalist analysis of modern painting. Suggesting that Greenberg misreads Kant, Craven promoted instead Schapiro's unorthodox, Marxist-inflected defence of abstraction in general and the New York school in particular, which paralleled and extended Korsch's theories. Craven deftly braids together Schapiro's relationship with Korsch by demonstrating the concerns they shared regarding Greenberg's formalist, empirical positivism:

Two more exemplary critiques of positivism must be noted here as well because of the way they demonstrate positivism's historical alliance with Western, especially US, imperialism, when it is applied to an analysis of culture along the lines defended by Greenberg. The first critique is by Karl Korsch, who is one of the most original proponents in the 20th century of 'critical Marxism' as an alternative to so-called 'dialectical materialism'... After moving to the US in the mid 1930s, Korsch then had a noteworthy interchange with art historian Meyer Schapiro, whose particular reading of Marx is much closer to the interpretation of Korsch *than to that of either Trotsky or Stalin*.<sup>38</sup>

Italicising for emphasis, Craven oriented Schapiro's ideology as flexibly triangulating between competing theories advanced by Korsch, Trotsky *and* Stalin. In contrast, Craven contested Greenberg's reductive, cold war formula that promoted abstract expressionism abroad as a demonstration of 'freedom' in the United States (in stark contrast to the propagandising social realist visual culture imposed in the USSR). Both of these essays, 'Meyer Schapiro, Karl Korsch and the Emergence of Critical Theory' and 'Clement Greenberg and the "Tri-

36 Craven 1994b, p. 47 (Craven's italics) as quoted from Korsch 1937, p. 356.

37 Craven, 1994a, p. 8.

38 Ibid. (Craven's italics). Craven continued: 'Korsch's superb critique of the concept of history underpinning positivism *and also Stalinism* – was originally published in 1937 in a small journal entitled *Marxist Quarterly* – a journal which was in fact founded and edited by Meyer Schapiro'.

umph" of Western Art' were written and published in the same year; together, they suggest a key moment in Craven's approach to critical theory whereby he began to emphatically verbalise tensions between the hegemony of the ruling classes over the despair of subaltern labourers that imbricate the hidden realities of alternative, epic, and cosmopolitan modernisms.

### 3 Critical Theory

By underplaying the degree to which early avant-garde groups were concerned with incorporating popular culture into the idiom of modernity ... as well as the ideological transformation of modernity into 'purist' modernism, the semi-official style of corporate capitalism, post-modernists are able to render their populist appeals more plausible. In the process, modern mass culture and the mass media – which have had a substantial amount to do with the global visibility accorded modernism – are glibly passed off as 'radical' new artistic elements. Lost in the pseudo-conflict of purist modernism and populist post-modernism, both of which are endemic to the West, is the only profound alternative to either: a truly internationalist synthesis drawing heavily on indigenous popular cultures that have always existed in a state of real conflict with both mass culture and global modernism.<sup>39</sup>

DAVID CRAVEN



The third section of the collected writings focuses on Craven's effort to interject and develop the methods of critical theory and postcolonial analysis within the discourse of Western art history. Craven's commitment to social democracy and his 'unorthodox Marxism' informed by the theories of the Frankfurt School provides the thematic link connecting the nine essays assembled here.

An unpublished manuscript that outlines 'Prerequisites for a New Criticism' shows the early development of Craven's original, theoretical approach. This short treatise analyses art historical methods in an effort to situate formalist conceits (disinterested self-criticism in the shadow of Kant) within the broader

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39 Craven 1984, unpublished manuscript.

context of phenomenological and semiological approaches. The essay reveals a scholar determined to expose the limitations of empirical formalism which merely produces reductive, positivist and analytic descriptions that conceal art's 'emancipatory aspects':

A concrete analysis is both self-referential and contextually referential, yet empirical analysis is merely self-referential, without recognizing that the resulting isolation (even if it were possible) would render the empirical particular incomprehensible. The empirical closure of formalism reifies the subjective act of creation, the process of perception, the politically emancipatory aspects of art, and the nonsublimated manifestations of Eros – all of which await critical consummation, not just passive description.<sup>40</sup>

Advocating for vigilant self-reflexivity, Craven cautions art critics to be cognisant of their own 'perceptual presuppositions and ideological assumptions, because no critic operates without them and the most profound critic operates with them by means of a self-reflexive turn'.<sup>41</sup> This admonition is extended and clarified in his review of Herbert Marcuse's *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*.

In this piece, Craven offered a rigorous, subtle and nuanced reading of historical materialism. While he celebrated Marcuse's ability to reveal the repressive aspect of Marxist aesthetics, Craven also admonished the philosopher for inadequacies in his proclamations regarding the autonomy of art which Craven doubted could be realized. At stake is the degree to which artistic expression is either reified by society or operates as a subverting social agent without falling prey to hypostasis, whereby Engels's dichotomy delineating content (politics) and form (aesthetics) refuse to be de-coupled:

Marcuse mistakes art's unending interdependence with a neo-Kantian idea of art's endless independence. As Adorno before him, Marcuse confuses art's semi-autonomy, its open-ended character, with the formalist view of art's autonomy, its supposed openness only to itself. Unfortunately, the result is a translation of art's synthetic character into an antinomian 'nature', which simultaneously saves art from being reified by social concepts yet preserves society from art's seditious other reason. By

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40 Craven 1980, unpublished manuscript.

41 Craven 1980.

the equivocation with which he uses the word 'autonomy', however, Marcuse indirectly concedes the tenuousness of a concept synonymous with certitude and self-containment: in some cases he refers to art as 'largely autonomous' (p. ix) while in others he mentions art's complete autonomy, its 'essential transcendence' (p. 37).<sup>42</sup>

Craven's review of Marcuse, the only opportunity he had to directly engage the writing of a key figure associated with the Frankfurt School in print, reveals a scholar willing to rebuke Marcuse's assumptions regarding art's 'complete autonomy': 'Art is significant only insofar as it initiates various dialogues, some of them political, which keep it open-ended and historically pertinent'.<sup>43</sup>

This bold review clarifies the degree to which aesthetic artefacts are both 'permeated with pessimism' and yet offer the 'visual experience of Eros' without succumbing to the limitations of a Kantian 'disinterested contemplation'.<sup>44</sup> Marcuse endorses a negative dialectics whereby art can be 'a form of affirmation through the reconciling catharsis'.<sup>45</sup> Craven assessed the implications of such a charge: 'The reintroduction, or rather re-acknowledgement, of the cathartic dimension is not done merely to make his [Marcuse's] approach more dialectical – that would border on a *priorism* – but in response to concrete historical developments'.<sup>46</sup> Searching for, discovering, and describing such culturally responsible art became Craven's mission – his work always sought to elide a *priorism* and embrace 'art as critical theory, social commentary, and the expression of Eros'.<sup>47</sup> Convinced that art could mend the repressive, inequitable and unjust tendencies of capitalist society, Craven examined art as the very locus of labour and production through which all people can potentially assert their right to live in a civil society without exploitation, one in which all are recognised equally for their humanity.

In 1982, Craven flew to Nicaragua to research the degree to which the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) supported the arts during the first years after the revolution. Craven's field work from this initial extended stay had a profound impact and provided him with a new research agenda that resulted in the publication of the *Art of the New Nicaragua* in 1983. A second trip in 1986 and subsequent research resulted in his landmark study *The New Concept of Art*

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42 Craven 1982, p. 110. Page numbers reference Marcuse, 1978.

43 Craven 1982, p. 112.

44 Craven 1982, p. 113.

45 Craven 1982, p. 114; and Marcuse 1978, p. 58.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

and *Popular Culture in Nicaragua* in 1989. While in Nicaragua, Craven witnessed numerous cultural opportunities for artistic endeavours provided as a means to promote national self-determination.

Craven's study of Latin American art and revolution produced a keen interest in distinguishing between local, popular cultural styles and global, mass cultural spectacles. He presented a paper at the 'Caucus on Marxism and Art' at the 1984 College Art Association's annual meeting that was, until now, never published. This essay examined the conflict between indigenous cultural practices (popular culture) and US-sponsored dictatorships in Latin America (Pinochet in Chile, Somoza in Nicaragua) that imported a superficial, consumer-based lifestyle (mass culture) from North America. Borrowing Benedict Anderson's taxonomy of nationalism, Craven noted: 'Every revolution of lasting import in the Americas has been based on a peculiar type of leftwing national self-determination – or what Anderson terms “popular nationalism” – just as every form of rightwing dictatorship or Imperialist and racist nationalism on its behalf has been based on “official nationalism” ... No serious study of Latin American art should begin discussing a revolutionary period without mentioning *what type of nationalism is at issue*'.<sup>48</sup>

According to Craven, Nicaragua under Somoza's rule can be characterised by 'a suppression of indigenous national culture as *intrinsically* subversive to the nation, on the one hand, and on the other, a garish imitation of US mass culture as somehow being a pure assertion of “national interests”'.<sup>49</sup> The Sandinistas' example is compelling because they promoted and supported local, cultural rituals and traditions. Throughout the 1980s, the Ministry of Culture established more than two dozen Centros Populares de Cultura (CPC's) that offered free training in drawing, painting, poetry, music, dance and theatre.<sup>50</sup> According to Craven, the Sandinistas

posited a *relative autonomy* for their own national self-determination in dynamic interchange with international developments towards a radical egalitarianism for *all* people ... The impetus for Nicaraguan self-determination, then, has presupposed a repudiation of the very nationalistic exclusivity and ethnocentrism that have functioned as the cultural wing of economic underdevelopment in the Third World.<sup>51</sup>

48 Craven and Dimitrakaki 2011, p. 125. See also Anderson 1983, pp. 83–111.

49 Craven 1984, p. 3 [unpublished manuscript].

50 Craven 1989a, pp. 207–20.

51 Craven 1984, p. 4.

Craven's carefully worded precision emphasised a *relative autonomy* because the international seepage of mass culture always threatens the integrity of local, popular cultures. In a forceful passage that distinguishes popular cultural production from mass cultural consumption, Craven suggested: 'the recent conflicts between indigenous periphery cultures and the "universal" standards of North American culture constitute yet another, albeit much more complex, chapter in the use of Western culture to forcefully name "the masses" as cultural consumers, rather than allowing them to reconstitute themselves as cultural producers'.<sup>52</sup> Such insight is the direct result of Craven's study of the role the arts played in Nicaragua following the Sandinista revolution. These formative, international experiences fostered Craven's growth as an art theorist seeking to articulate art's potential influence as a cross-cultural instrument for engineering social change by encouraging an organic hybridisation that enables the consumer/worker to also be a viewer/artist and a spectator/performer.

Craven witnessed a flowering of artistic output in Nicaragua in the four years following the revolution. He reports: 'the CPC presented over 6,733 cultural activities, including 110 art festivals' and more than '2,000 people from the popular classes have studied and learned to write poetry'.<sup>53</sup> The damage from the Somoza regime's systematic suppression of indigenous culture validated for Craven Gramsci's theory of class hegemony. Craven articulated his understanding of the concept: 'the ruling class does not stay in power solely by economic leverage or police force, but also by persuading the exploited to accept the cultural beliefs and moral values upon which the system itself is based'.<sup>54</sup>

Craven applied Gramsci's theory of hegemony to offer a stinging rebuke of 'conventional art historians' in *Kritische Berichte* in 1986. Asserting that modern art history developed during the monopoly stage of capitalism, Craven produced a theory of art labour that compared art historians to office workers, or more accurately 'art clerks, who, in spite of the fact that they have some self-determination, are content to collect data, marshal facts, assemble research, and shuffle information without ever asking: what is the conceptual framework for this technical labour and how does it relate to the social process as a whole?'<sup>55</sup> Determined to avoid being simply an empirical positivist asking formalist questions about art works, Craven modified such limited methods

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52 Craven 1984, p. 10.

53 Craven 1989, p. 210.

54 Craven 1986b, p. 58.

55 Craven 1986b, p. 56.



by analysing how works of art relate to institutions (governments, corporations, banks, mass media, universities, etc.) that construct and control the mainstream public's understanding of socio-economic realities. That is, Craven believed the political conditions (or degree of autonomy) under which works of art are produced are, at the very least, equally as important as the subjective aesthetics of the finished art products that formalist art historians attempt to objectify. Craven proclaimed:

Conventional art historians draw, either implicitly or explicitly, on traditional humanism to justify their actions on behalf of 'humanity in general' – a justification contradicted by their own reduction of art history to a dehumanized formal procedure. This paradox is the necessary result of a discipline still exalted for its intellectual importance, even as it has become a species of intellect-work limited to clerical skills. Thus, appeals to traditional humanism are used to secure social legitimacy for the anti-social aims of hegemonic art history. Were conventional art history seen for what it is, it would be recognized as generally unrelated to history and largely irrelevant to humanity.<sup>56</sup>

This indictment of his discipline indicates the passion with which Craven practised art history (in part, by taking heed of Baudelaire's alliterative call for art criticism that is 'partisan, passionate and political'<sup>57</sup>); and, therefore, the significant role Craven believed it could play in effecting social change.

For instance, the essay 'Present Indicative Politics and Future Perfect Positions: Barack Obama and *Third Text*' illustrates how Craven attempted to practice what he preached. In an effort to assess the role the popular arts played in producing the 'historic shift' of Barack Obama's victory in the 2008 US elections to become the first African-American president, Craven offered a sustained formal analysis of Shepard Fairey's *Hope* (2008). This approach to describing the image would seem as if Craven is practising 'conventional art history': he breaks down the compositional elements of the image and, in doing so, draws numerous parallels with canonical works of art. For instance, he compares it to Alberto Korda's portrait of Che Guevara and Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington. But, by doing so, Craven demonstrates how such intertextual juxtapositions can elicit hidden truths: 'The trajectory travelled by Fairey's poster image of Obama was exactly the reverse of that of Stuart's oil painting. Fairey's

<sup>56</sup> Craven 1986b, pp. 58–9.

<sup>57</sup> Baudelaire 1965, pp. 173–4.

image was first put up on the walls of inner-city streets before graduating to a national museum, while the portrait of Washington gained fame in a national museum before finding its way through prints to the one dollar bill in the USA, and so onto the streets in a most literal sense'.<sup>58</sup> Craven frequently looked to the street for a place to locate art in action. Clearly, Craven was inspired by the community-building exercise of painting murals that he often witnessed while in Nicaragua.

#### 4 Latin America

[T]he question properly put is *not* 'Modernism, right or wrong?' We need to advance beyond modernism critically, rather than be dismissive of it (which would not constitute a legitimate advance). To do so, we must begin by avoiding sweeping referendums and *ad hoc* tribunals that simply decide for or against modernism, as if modernism were not a deeply contradictory project marked by a plurality of divergent tendencies, thus being constituted by both progressive and regressive moments simultaneously.

DAVID CRAVEN<sup>59</sup>



The fourth section assembles a handful of Craven's essential writings on Latin America. The five essays compiled here represent the range of artists and countries about which Craven wrote. Of particular interest is the essay 'The Democratisation of Culture'. In it, Craven assessed the development and government support of Cuban art after the revolution. As he did in Nicaragua, Craven discovered that communists in Cuba also promoted what they called 'cultural democracy' through the establishment of *Casas de Cultura* which consisted of 'an expansive process whereby the populace has assumed a far more participatory role in the cultural life of the country, than normally prevails elsewhere'.<sup>60</sup> In three decades, from 1958–89, Cuba grew from having merely eight museums

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<sup>58</sup> Craven 2009, pp. 646–7.

<sup>59</sup> Craven 1996, p. 29.

<sup>60</sup> Craven 1989d, p. 129.

and fewer than one hundred libraries to having over two hundred and thirty museums and nearly two thousand libraries. Prior to the revolution, there were only three university centres, three decades later there were forty serving a college population 12 times larger than before, including 46 percent women (one of the highest such percentages at the time). Craven recounted numerous anecdotes of free and open debate in Cuban society spurred by a theatrical or musical performance, or an art exhibition. He explored the country's convulsions between periods of excessive centralisation of power, corresponding bureaucratisation and loss of worker self-management to periods of pronounced decentralisation, de-bureaucratisation, and autogestion (or, workplace democracy).

Craven, therefore, also acknowledged problems inherent in the process, namely the absence of independent daily publications with a labour union perspective, 'constricting essential avenues for constructive criticism'.<sup>61</sup> Yet, Craven pointed out that the vaunted notion of a free press in the West is a myth as well. The private ownership of the press precludes the same access for all to exercise freedom of speech. That is, in a capitalist democracy, only those who can afford to own mass media outlets have the opportunity to broadcast their free speech on a scale that reaches 'the masses'. Here, Craven reminds us 'of Marx's acute observation that the first guarantee of a free press is that the press not be a business'.<sup>62</sup> Craven points out key episodes of impropriety in post-revolutionary Cuba that were handled poorly (particularly the Padilla affair of 1971);<sup>63</sup> but, he also admonished the West for its biased perception of Cuba prohibiting opportunity for better understanding between capitalist and communist countries:

It is ironic that the mainstream Western media, particularly those in the U.S., will be unable to criticise Cuban culture legitimately until they gravitate away from the uncritical, and utterly reflexive dismissal of Cuban culture. Here as elsewhere, a scholarly grasp of the pertinent data remains a *sine qua non* for focusing on the failings – failings which can only be assessed fairly in the context of concomitant successes. The problem is

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61 Craven 1989d, p. 147.

62 Craven 1989d, p. 147–8.

63 Heriberto Padilla was a Cuban poet who initially supported the revolution but began to publicly criticise Castro's government by the late 1960s. He was incarcerated in 1971. This led to an international group of philosophers and writers, including Susan Sontag and John-Paul Sartre, to protest and draw attention to this violation of human rights. Padilla was eventually released from prison. He was allowed asylum in the US in 1980.

not that the U.S. media and many in academia criticize Cuba, but rather that they do so for reasons hopelessly misinformed and transparently self-serving. Yet, only criticism that is based on extensive knowledge, as well as being devoid of hypocrisy, is worthwhile in assessing the cultural development of revolutionary Cuba.<sup>64</sup>

This spirited defence of the positive features of the Cuban revolution allows for a dialectical engagement with the missteps and shortcomings of Castro's government as well. However, Craven remains consistent by applying the same dialectical rigour to institutions in the West that also fall short of truly guaranteeing and honouring the freedoms of press and speech.

An abiding concern for Craven was a dialogical broadening of the conception of modern art so as to properly account for the migration of modernism's core concepts and ideas regarding the visual arts from continent to continent. This transmission of ideas, Craven argued, should not be seen as a one-way street: modern artists from Europe and the United States were as influenced by the artistic traditions of indigenous cultures in the developing world as artists from economically disadvantaged countries who adopted conventions from Western art history. In 'The Latin American Origins of "Alternative Modernism"', Craven guards against falling into the trap of ethnocentrism that maintains brittle narratives of modern art by relying exclusively on Eurocentric assumptions regarding the avant-garde's rejection of the art academy, the myth of idiosyncratic originality as a marker of genius (and as a marketable signature style), and the emergence of abstraction as the central motif and primary signifier of modern art. Craven often discussed the dialectic between figuration and abstraction to demonstrate how these stylistic poles intersect with a second binary that distinguishes Western art from non-Western art (and the implicit centre/periphery rhetoric it conjures) by means of prejudicial stereotypes that distinguish the familiar from the exotic. Craven credibly demonstrated that the initial concept of '*modernismo*' (as distinct from Baudelaire's painter of modern life)<sup>65</sup> originated in Nicaragua: 'the term modernism (or *modernismo*) was in fact invented in the 1880s on the periphery of the world economic order by Rubén Darío of Nicaragua, Latin America's first internationally acclaimed modern author'.<sup>66</sup> The point, Craven emphasised, is that modern art is emphatically an ongoing process of cross-cultural fertilisation fermenting new forms

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64 Craven 1989d, p. 150.

65 Baudelaire 1964, pp. 1–40.

66 Craven 1996a, p. 30.

of creative expression that enhance our awareness of the social relationships we mutually share with others, especially those from other cultures, countries, or continents.

Craven convincingly argues that modernism is always already a hybridised plurality of 'isms'. And, to clarify his usage, Craven routinely incorporated modifying adjectives – Alternative, Cosmopolitan and Epic – to elucidate how he understood Modernism(s). For Craven, modernism defies essentialism; rather, in his writings, it consists of a multiplicity of variations each bearing 'family resemblances' (as Wittgenstein would have it) which can be simultaneously complementary and contradictory. Yet, each stylised member of the modern art family – whether grounded in abstraction, conception, figuration, or narration – carries the capacity to simultaneously contribute to the potential for a revolutionary transformation of society and be co-opted as a proxy to advertise and promote commercial interests. The divergent tendencies of modernism constitute 'both progressive and regressive moments simultaneously'.<sup>67</sup> Craven highlighted his conception of multicultural hybridisation as it denotes the progressive legacy of alternative, cosmopolitan, epic modernism, whereby 'we shall see artworks that are anti-imperial and non-Eurocentric (but *not* anti-Western); artworks that are richly multicultural *and* that are unquestionably linked to modernism'.<sup>68</sup> Above all, for Craven 'modernism designates the minority artistic tendencies in opposition to, yet also tied to, the official high culture in the West'.<sup>69</sup> To demonstrate this model of modern art as a catalyst for social change, Craven cites such diverse examples as Pablo Picasso's hybridised collages and Diego Rivera's 'Anáhuac Cubism', Wifredo Lam's 'Ethnographic Surrealism' and Antonio Gaudí's 'Catalán modernism', Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (once owned by Walter Benjamin) and Sandinista murals painted in the 1980s. Craven closed his landmark essay defining Alternative Latin American Modernism with a brief etymology of the term 'post-modern' as coined by Arnold Toynbee in 1938 when writing *A Study of History* to denote 'post-Eurocentric', 'post-modernisation' and 'post-colonial', which conforms with the hybridity Craven insisted characterises modernism itself: 'there is a sense in which we have entered a postmodern, postcolonial and post-western centred period of history, there is another sense in which we have yet to catch up with modernism'.<sup>70</sup>

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67 Ibid.

68 Craven 1996a, pp. 43–4.

69 Craven 1996a, p. 33.

70 Craven 1996a, p. 44.

A related essay, 'Postcolonial Modernism in the Work of Diego Rivera and José Carlos Mariátegui (or New Light on a Neglected Relationship)' returns to this chronological conundrum because it is integral to Craven's explanation of art's transformative capacities. In addition, by doing so, Craven also reveals that 'post-colonial' critiques of imperial representation carry with them 'a series of linkages and articulations' of resistance with 'a wide range of activities including conceptions and actions which are, or appear to be, complicit with the imperial enterprise'.<sup>71</sup> The syncretised conflation of numerous cultural practices and rituals shared by those of Indigenous and European descent produced the ideal conditions for a truly dialogical modern art style just as Latin American cities were simultaneously being 'modernised'.

Craven honed his rhetorical capacity to clarify and refine his terms so as to describe highly complex theories with precision. Permit me this extended quote from an exemplary passage of such exactitude to demonstrate Craven's careful application of temporal terms such as 'modernism' and 'postcolonial':

[E]arly modernism at its best possessed a multilateral trajectory that shifted about in dynamic fashion, *moving both forward to the past and back to the future simultaneously*. What results visually and otherwise is not a melted-down mixture or monolithic *mestizaje*, but rather a glittering, multi-ethnic mosaic of cross-cultural references and syncopated fragments. They no more allow a mere return to roots, than they permit closure at any one moment in time, but at most only the montage of different temporal modes. As such, Rivera's painting is an early, perhaps the earliest, example of what is now known as 'postcolonial art' because of the way it hinges on a darting interplay, which is both multi-class-based and multi-ethnic in nature. Unlike the other and more binary tradition of *anti-colonial art*, the *postcolonial work* of Rivera showcases an unsettled interchange of the urban and rural, of the centre and periphery, of the mass produced and the artisanal, of illusionary mass and modernist flatness. The Rivera image thus embodies the ebb and flow of post-colonial art ...<sup>72</sup>

Post-colonialism, then, in Craven's thought, is the key hinge (the hyphenated backslash) joining such polarities as empire/colony, oppressor/oppressed, machine-made/hand-made, urban/rural into a hybridised polyglossia or multi-

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<sup>71</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1995, p. 3.

<sup>72</sup> Craven 2001, p. 7 (Craven's italics).

ethnic mosaic that is perpetually shifting. Craven had a theoretical preference for 'both/and' readings, routinely locating and noting ontological and epistemological sites where categorical oppositions intersect or dialectically converge.

Craven demonstrated his predilection for 'both/and' explication in one of the last essays he published in *Third Text*, 'Realism Revisited and Re-theorised in "Pan-American" Terms'. This essay is, ostensibly, a book review of *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere*. But, to point out the book's pros and cons, Craven began with a careful analysis of Lukács's definitions of 'realism' and 'naturalism' by accounting for the implications of Lukács's assumptions and theoretical weaknesses. Lukács, according to Craven, expected modern artists to recreate a harmonious totality based on societal 'typicality' that revealed (as much as it concealed) the 'alienating conditions caused by modern capitalism'.<sup>73</sup> Lukács's paradoxical charge to artists typifies the divided, dislocating and fragmentary nature of modernity (and modernisation) in which we are 'torn between the general and the particular (or between the social good and individual gain), as well as between the conceptual and the sensuous'.<sup>74</sup> Craven's *précis* refines Lukács's charge to modern, 'realist' artists as a call 'to reunify in art what is fragmented in modern society by means of a dialectical recovery of the complex totality, which places on trial the splintered existence enforced by the established order'.<sup>75</sup>

While such reunification conforms to Craven's 'both/and' analysis, he also recognised weaknesses in Lukács's position because it 'presuppose[s] a *symmetrical relation* between an art work and a social class, as well as its ideology (as if there were only one to a class)'. Craven wrote:

According to this view, art and class (or art and the nation-state) are treated as mirror-like structural homologies for each other, without being able to deal either with the unevenness of historical development or the contradictory character of organic art within a fractured modern society that permits no aesthetic finality or conclusive harmony.<sup>76</sup>

For amplification and modification of Lukács's conception of 'Realism', Craven held out the work of Marxist thinkers from Latin America and the Caribbean, particularly Jose Carlos Mariategui, Adolfo Sanchez-Vazquez, Alberto Hijar, C.L.R. James and Gerardo Mosquera.

73 Craven 2007, p. 308.

74 Craven 2007, p. 309.

75 Craven 2007, p. 309. See also Lukács 1952, pp. 309–16.

76 Craven 2007, p. 309.

Craven does this because he believed too many North American and European art scholars studying Latin American culture rely on Eurocentric theoretical sources without assessing how they must be adapted for different cultural contexts. Craven holds out in particular the work of Sánchez Vázquez and Mosquera to demonstrate the significance of such adaptations. Craven lauds Sánchez Vázquez for his advocating 'socialist pluralism' and demonstrating that Lukács's attempt to define a normative language of art based on cognition alone strayed from the writings of Marx and Engels. Craven points out that Mosquera, at the 1985 International Lukács Conference (held in Havana, Cuba) criticised the Marxist philosopher for defining 'realism' through exclusive recourse to Western European traditions that ultimately, Mosquera asserted, privilege the literary over the visual. Moreover, Lukács's Eurocentrism leads directly to the fallacy of universality which, Mosquera pointed out, is defined solely through Western cultural foundations and experiences. A dialogical exchange occurs when cultures from different continents intermingle and coalesce; the inescapability of hybridisation is simultaneously a post-colonial condition and a defining characteristic of alternative modernism(s).

For Craven, Lukács's binary formulation is too narrow and lends itself to a-historical analysis of art (i.e., normative, universally valid, class-contingent) far too easily; for, if 'social realism' is redefined as an 'attitude', then an affinity between realism as icon and abstraction as index is made possible. And, to reveal this important symbiosis, Craven points to the reception of Abstract Expressionism in Latin America as a beacon for stimulating social change, contrary to the claims of mainstream scholarship. Following Sánchez Vázquez's lead, Craven posited a dialectical convergence between 'social realism' and 'abstraction':

The sign cannot be engineered mechanically from above by Stalinist dictators nor can it be linguistically regulated in early Foucault fashion through the uncontested power of one so-called 'dominant discourse', as if the subjects of society had no individual agency yet simultaneously wallowed in unbridled subjectivity as 'powerless victims'. Neither of these latter two positions is capable of grasping how artistic production, along with reception, involves a multipoint, dialogical process that continually sees the popular classes redefine the limits and the logic of the discursive fields within which artworks are assigned meaning. In this sense, there is no *engagé* without engaged audiences, no partisanship in art without partisan interpretations to propel it ...<sup>77</sup>

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77 Craven and Dimitrakaki 2012, p. 129.



## 5 Abstract Expressionism

Abstract Expressionism, for example, has not only served but also subverted U.S. hegemony in the Americas, because this North American visual vocabulary has provided noteworthy points of development for progressive artists from the 'other Americas', whose work exists in fundamental opposition to the present hierarchy of relations that sustain US dominance throughout Latin America. This process does not entail simply the 'influence' of Abstract Expressionism on dependent cultural traditions, but rather the critical reclamation by Latin American artists of artistic practices that the Abstract Expressionists earlier borrowed from a variety of non-Western, Third World cultures.

DAVID CRAVEN<sup>78</sup>



The fifth section of the book collects a few of Craven's best essays about Abstract Expressionism. The international reception of the Abstract Expressionists, and conversely the Abstract Expressionists' interest in non-Western art, were topics to which Craven frequently returned. In the essay 'Abstract Expressionism, Automatism and the Age of Automation', Craven referenced the New York school's assimilation of 'non-Western cultural practices' and 'Third World art forms' through recourse to Meyer Schapiro's Marxist-inflected reading of Abstract Expressionism as a form of labour. Quoting extensively from Schapiro's 1957 essay 'Recent Abstract Art', Craven built upon Schapiro's view a more robust reading of spontaneous, artistic production as a form of disalienated labour, particularly during an age when mundane, repressive industry dehumanises through the technocratic efficiencies of scientific management (Taylorism).<sup>79</sup> Craven pointed out that Robert Motherwell 'specifically identified this new concept of painting as a signifier of improvised, non-regulated human labour and thus as a critique of the standardization and instrumentalism endemic to the capitalist mode of production in the post-war US'.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Craven 1991, p. 46.

<sup>79</sup> Taylor 1911.

<sup>80</sup> Craven 1990, p. 84.

Craven noted that many of the key Abstract Expressionists – Pollock, de Kooning, Motherwell, Rothko – utilised spontaneous, improvisatory methods to draw out their somatic engagement with both their media (paint) and their psychological imago so as to affirm human self-realisation. For support, Craven offered as a primary case study the work of Barnett Newman, whose ‘nuanced defense of anarchist ideals’<sup>81</sup> propelled him to run for Mayor of New York in 1933. To demonstrate the depth of his commitment to anarchism, Newman, according to Craven, reportedly told Harold Rosenberg that if properly understood his paintings would ‘mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism’.<sup>82</sup> Craven noted that in Newman’s foreword to Peter Kropotkin’s *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, this New York school artist described his own political ideology by declaring ‘only those are free who are free from the values of the Establishment. And that’s what Anarchism is all about’.<sup>83</sup> For Newman, the direct formation of communities requires social spontaneity which, at most, defies and, at least, contradicts the naturalising conditions of social conformity within the sublimating logic of scientific management.

The artist at work producing paintings, then, shows a way to resist the technocratic, predatory ‘nature’ of mass culture ‘the Establishment’ has constructed as an ineluctable hegemonic system promoting mass consumption and consumer debt as obligatory common-sense. To step out of this illusory construct, the anarchist artist need not adhere to a particular style but, rather, seek a new mode of artistic production altogether; one that is disalienated. Craven declared:

this new means of producing art drew in turn on a concept of human nature that involved both the belief in human ‘spontaneity’ unregulated by repressive social institutions and the view ... that a ‘natural’ consequence of allowing autonomous individualism would *not* be selfishness. Rather the mutual creation of interdependent and egalitarian communities capable of accommodating individual spontaneity would ‘naturally’ emerge.<sup>84</sup>

Here again, we confront an optimistic idealism that is rarely, if ever, realised, requiring specifically the luxury, in today’s world, of time for leisure activities like the production of art. Craven recognised that such egalitarian com-

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81 Craven 1990, p. 87.

82 Craven 1990, p. 91.

83 Newman 1968, p. ix.

84 Craven 1990, p. 92.

munities could only emerge if the ratio between the necessities of both leisure (as an opportunity for self-improvement) and labour (as a means for self-preservation) is equalised. Under present circumstances, the anarchist ideal cannot be realised; therefore, Craven argued:

[W]e cannot stop with Newman's explanation of how this anti-capitalist, socially alienated and humanly affirmative art arose as the 'spontaneous' outpouring of 'autonomous individuals'. Instead, we must subject these latter views to a sustained critique. Only then can we understand the process whereby art opposed to multi-national capitalism could sometimes be used to promote ideological tendencies interrelated with this very same system.<sup>85</sup>

In all of his subsequent writings on Abstract Expressionism, Craven emphasised its negative critique of capitalism and its reception as a form of resistance in the developing world against both 'Stalinism' and 'McCarthyism'.

Craven often articulated his thoughts on McCarthyism and the visual arts, the essay 'Abstract Expressionism and Third-World Art: A Post-Colonial Approach to "American" Art' offered a unique and insightful assessment of this era. In this essay, written before the FBI documents were released, Craven outlined the antagonistic relationship between artists and the US government during the 1950s and 60s. Craven explores the response by the US public when in 1949 Representative George Dondero attacked the Abstract Expressionists by insisting on a link between Communism and all of the artistic 'isms' imported from abroad. And, this jingoistic episode is significant for Craven because it punctuates his insight: 'it is important to realize in a certain sense, McCarthyism was more about ethnocentrism than about "anti-Communism"'.<sup>86</sup> Ideological and cultural tensions in the United States during the cold war resulted in a 'Red Scare' that unfolded during an era in which post-war conformity was broadcast into working-class 'family rooms' through televised 'family sit-coms' modelling for them how to think and behave like materialist consumers. The reception of the Abstract Expressionists, then, must be seen in such a cultural backdrop.<sup>87</sup>

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85 Craven 1990, p. 99.

86 Craven 1991, p. 47.

87 *Life* magazine's ironic and sceptical query of Jackson Pollock in August 1949 – 'Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?' – typifies the incredulity towards the Abstract Expressionists many in the United States felt as they formulate 'my child ...' arguments when exposed to Pollock's paintings.

On this point, Craven offered a stringent review of Serge Guilbaut's widely read *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* in *Art History* (1985) that revealed his aptitude for elucidating the complexity of how various competing and overlapping ideologies affect artists, particularly the Abstract Expressionists. The Clement Greenberg epigram that initiates the first chapter, according to Craven, set Guilbaut on the wrong course due to its reductive ideological assumptions: 'Some day it will have to be told how anti-Stalinism which started out more or less as Trotskyism turned into art for art's sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically for what was to come'.<sup>88</sup> Craven contended that Guilbaut's thesis – Abstract Expressionism was an ambassador for Cold War liberalism both at home and abroad – failed to recognise that Abstract Expressionism was also 'an ideological casualty of Cold War liberalism'.<sup>89</sup> So, Craven re-wrote the epigram:

'Someday it will have to be told how anti-Stalinism which started out *for some* as Trotskyism – although for others *it began and ended* with anarchism, non-aligned socialism, or social democracy – turned, *for a few*, into a McCarthyist assault on art, thus purging art for life's sake of most leftist impulses and thereby cleared the way, unjustifiably, for the formalist modernism that was to follow'. Only an account that incorporates these basic things can elucidate with any depth what occurred with the ascendancy, appropriation, and institutionalisation of Abstract Expressionism.<sup>90</sup>

As this shows, Craven sought to consistently produce research that unpacked and clarified highly complex interactions between artists who are ideologically progressive and the social institutions they often serve – government, banking, big business, law, education, media, etc. – institutions that appropriate art as they extend and ossify their ideological foothold on daily life.

The international policy of post-war US focused on protecting the commercial interests of multinational corporations abroad from the threat of populism, particularly in the form of organised labour and social democracy, by installing autocrats and providing military goods to intimidate an impoverished citizenry into acquiescence. Resistance, therefore, must come in a variety of forms, the visual arts being just one of them. Abstract Expressionism became a trope of progressivism for Craven, because it embraced a dialogical and multicultural

88 Guilbaut 1983, p. 17. Guilbaut provides no citation, just an attribution to Greenberg at the end of the epigram. The line was taken from Greenberg 1961, p. 230.

89 Craven 1985b, 507.

90 Craven 1985b, 510.

polyglossia, and embodied the hybridised mosaic of alternative modernisms that he believed offered at least a partial glimpse of an egalitarian society in which the reward for labour and opportunity for leisure is shared equally. Craven suggested the reception of Abstract Expressionism in the Third World offered new approaches to permit a more complete understanding of the fragmentary nature of modernity and the alienating conditions in which art is produced:

[P]rogressive artists from Nicaragua, Cuba, and elsewhere in Latin America understood Abstract Expressionism in much more sophisticated terms than that of any monolithic 'cultural imperialism'. For these artists, many of whom are unquestionably revolutionaries, Abstract Expressionism signifies an *art of the Americas* grounded in the cultural practices of Native Americans, Afro-Americans, and Hispanics, as well as in those of the European avant-garde. As such, Abstract Expressionism entails a much larger field of possibilities, both progressive and reactionary, than the Eurocentric accounts of most mainstream apologists would otherwise permit.<sup>91</sup>

Although Craven conceded that the relationship of the arts to labour is both ill-defined and contradictory in contemporary Western society, he emphasised parallels in production to advance a theory of 'Romantic anti-capitalism'. In contrast to the scientific management of multinational corporations efficiently extrapolating surplus value from labour power and driving down wages while plastering the public sphere with advertorials encouraging workers to accumulate more and more consumer debt, modern artists produce work for others (dealers, museum directors, patrons) who have access to the financial means to sell, collect, exhibit and lend art, but the artist is simultaneously free of managerial command and enjoys, as a result, greater opportunities to experience workplace democracy (autogestion), if not outright autonomy. These alternative working conditions, in contradiction to capitalist modes of production, only offer, at best, hope for the working classes. Unable to surmount the trauma of uneven historical development, Craven recognised that art can only go so far in ameliorating the alienated condition of 'contemporary' humanity.

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91 Craven 1991, p. 64.



**PART 1**

*Artists*







# Mondrian De-Mythologised: Towards a Newer Virgil

## I

Je dirai qu'un peu de formalisme éloigne de l'histoire, mais que beau coup  
isèd ramene.

ROLAND BARTHES



Had Clement Greenberg ever questioned Bertrand Russell about the 'essence' of painting, he would have encountered a bemused expression – not, of course, because the British philosopher could not provide an answer, but because he would not permit the question. Being a man with an austere honed vocabulary, Russell would have stated, as he has written elsewhere: 'The notion of essence is an intimate part of every philosophy subsequent to Aristotle, until we come to modern times. It is, in my opinion, a hopelessly muddle-headed notion ... The question is purely linguistic: a "word" may have an essence, but a "thing" cannot'.<sup>1</sup>

Although the encounter is hypothetical, the implications it involves for Greenberg's pseudo-positivist concept of 'pure' painting are quite real. A recurrent theme in the American critic's reviews is the emphasis on the 'irreducible

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<sup>1</sup> Russell 1945, pp. 162–63. The reader should know the brilliant critiques of philosophical positivism that have been written by Marcuse 1964; Adorno and Horkheimer 1944; and Donald Kuspit 1972. Just as Marcuse has shown that Wittgenstein's acceptance of ordinary language as the arbiter of philosophy represents an implicit conformity to the status quo, Kuspit has revealed that the minimalist emphasis on mute formalism is also a crypto-reactionary attitude. Instead of Tertullian's credo, believe in the unbelievable, Judd and Stella tell us to believe in the inexplicable. Their facile fixation with 'objecthood' in the 1960s, at the same time the French intellectuals and artists were denouncing the use of art as a mere object by a consumer society, underscores all too clearly the use of 'pure' art as an alibi for an impure society. As Walter Benjamin observed in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History': 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism' (Benjamin, 1968 [1940], p. 256).

essence' of each medium – an idea he correlates with positivistic traditions in contemporary science and philosophy.<sup>2</sup> According to Greenberg, 'The notion of the empirical and the positive has undergone much revision over the last hundred years ... Aesthetic sensibility has shifted accordingly'.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, there has been, in his estimation, a specialisation of the arts concomitant with a self-conscious concern for formal irreducibility fomented by an effort to achieve concreteness.<sup>4</sup>

Greenberg's notion of media essences could hardly be classified as a tautology in the technical sense used by the early Wittgenstein – a proposition of which the contradictory is self-contradictory – since this tenet, not its opposite, is self-refuting. Whether one consults Auguste Comte, the French philosopher who was the first to develop a positivist system, Carnap and the Viennese Logical Positivists, or Ayer and the English logical positivists, the verdict would be unanimously supportive of Russell's testimony. As formulated by Comte and employed thereafter both in science and in philosophy, the basic premise of positivism has been an abandonment of the quixotic quest to discover the essences of things, in favour of ascertaining the relationships between phenomena. Thus, Greenberg's precept of essences is confronted with a paradox from which it cannot be logically extricated. If, as he has written, significant art since Courbet has spoken 'for positivism',<sup>5</sup> then his own anti-positivist theory of medium purity is inadequate to deal with it. If, however, Picasso, Gris, Miró, etc., are not, as he has contended, 'positivists in the best of their art', then they must be significant for reasons other than those he gives.<sup>6</sup>

To ignore Greenberg's remarks about positivism, however, leads to a Gordian knot that Occam's razor cannot cut. On the one hand, the art critic's use of 'essences' is in a primitive, pre-Husserlian sense which implies ahistoricism. That is, they are a priori actual experiences, being givens with which the artist must then work. On the other hand, the American critic is forever assuring us that his *aperçus* are historical judgments. Inconsistencies of this sort have led to unacceptable arbitrariness in his criticism. Having read in one essay that the 'modernist sensibility ... allows sculpture to be as pictorial as it pleases',<sup>7</sup> we read in another that 'what really spoils Michelangelo's sculpture is ... pictorial illusion', without any effort being made to define the contextual sensibility

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2 Greenberg 1993b [1962], p. 131.

3 Greenberg 1986b [1949], p. 314.

4 Ibid.

5 Greenberg 1986b [1946], p. 88.

6 Greenberg 1948, p. 9.

7 Greenberg 1961, p. 143 ['The New Sculpture' as published in Greenberg, 1961].

involved – as has been done by Friedlander, Antal, Dvorrák, and especially Hauser.<sup>8</sup> It hardly needs to be added that such instances as this suffice to dismiss Hilton Kramer's objection to Greenberg's overuse of history, which he then couples with the non sequitur of proclaiming him Roger Fry's purist heir.<sup>9</sup>

Not surprisingly, the misplaced pretensions of Greenberg have led to a misinterpretation of Piet Mondrian. Labelling as fashionable cant any comments about art as a means to social consciousness, rather than as an end in itself, the American critic asserted that Mondrian and his significant contemporaries 'derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in'.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the contrary is true, since far from believing in only art *qua* art, the Dutch master proclaimed unequivocally his concern with social, not medium, purification. A measure of de Stijl's modernity that established it as distinctly avant-garde was precisely the definition of its artistic intent. When differentiating between past and present art, Renato Poggioli noted that the tendency to go beyond the limits of the art form, the attempt to foster a new *Weltanschauung*, is the principle distinction between movements and schools.<sup>11</sup> All those groups that are movements, like de Stijl, seek to create a new life style through art, rather than merely promote a new style for art. Mondrian, the leading exponent of de Stijl's reformatory posture, capsulated the group's position when in 'Art and Life' he wrote: 'One of the worst vices of man is the exploitation of his fellowmen ... Warranting man an independent existence in the immaterial as well as in the material domain of life is the most urgent task, to which we have thus to apply ourselves.'<sup>12</sup>

These remarks reflect an affinity with William Morris's ideas that are antithetical to the precept *l'art pour l'art*. Since the Englishman defined art as a human expression of joy in labour, and thus was the first to apply Marx's theory of labour value to art, he believed in an 'all pervading art' possible only when society had been sufficiently ameliorated.<sup>13</sup> Mondrian chose to work on the level of attitudes, though, instead of dealing with particular political situations, as did Morris who along with Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling founded the Socialist League in 1884. Hence, the Dutch painter inverted the English artist's method, yet retained his aim. While Morris contended that the new art would be an expression of improved working conditions, Mondrian believed

8 Greenberg 1993a [1952], pp. 107–113.

9 Kramer 1973, p. 501.

10 Greenberg 1986a [1939], p. 9.

11 Poggioli 1982, p. 18.

12 Jaffé 1970, p. 135.

13 Morris 1974, p. 84.

that improved working conditions would be a result of his new art. In 'Natural Reality and Abstract Reality', the Dutch artist stated that any person capable of perceiving the presumed universal harmony in nature would be capable of producing neoplastic beauty. Because almost anyone supposedly possessed the ability to acquire this type of perception, Mondrian predicted that, 'In the future, the realisation of pure plastic expression in palpable reality will replace the work of art ... Thus we will no longer have the need of pictures and sculpture, for we will live in realised art.'<sup>14</sup> In response to Georg Lukács's objections about the 'abstract gesture' which would mean 'not the enrichment, but the negation of art', one could say that Mondrian's goal was the enrichment, not the negation of life; presumably Lukács's reasons for desiring an 'enriched' art, though Socialist realism at present merits no such adjective.<sup>15</sup> As both Adorno and Marcuse have shown, the present political situation is such that art survives by negating itself. In an unfree state, art can sustain the image of freedom most effectively by annulling its position in the status quo.<sup>16</sup> For similar reasons, Roland Barthes has noted that modernism began with the search for a literature that was no longer possible.<sup>17</sup> Mondrian provides a related example for the pictorial arts, since he sought a type of painting that in the future would no longer be necessary. Once his social ends had been fulfilled, the means of fulfilment, i.e., his pictures employing what he termed the 'destructive element in art', would no longer be produced. His enrichment of society presupposed the ultimate negation of his paintings.

Aware that the ideas which provided the *raison d'être* for his art would go unnoticed were people to view his works from a formalist perspective, the Dutch artist published articles about his pictures. For this reason, a journal was founded by de Stijl in 1917 with the self-avowed aim that, 'When the new

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14 Mondrian 1945, p. 32. Nothing underscores more the uncompromising radicality of Mondrian's theory than his anticipation of and influence on the French leftists of 1968. Michel Ragon, one of the leading revolutionary critics, emphasised the student's indebtedness to de Stijl and defined socialist art in exactly the same way that Mondrian had defined 'realised' neo-plasticism: 'In fact, the artist and contemporary should be of such a kind that the worker not have art in his home but that he live in art, that his house and place of work be works of art, that the streets be works of art, that the entire society bathe in art'. These remarks by Ragon follow his praise of de Stijl for its intention to produce 'an art that would be an environment for all men at every moment ... This is how art will be truly socialised – that is, it will permeate everywhere. It will be a part of man's conditioning' (Ragon 1968, pp. 31–7).

15 Lukács 1971a, p. 46.

16 Marcuse 1955, p. 145.

17 Barthes, 1983, p. 38.

ideas on modern plastic beauty do not seem to penetrate the general public, it becomes the task of the expert to awaken the layman's sense of beauty.<sup>18</sup> Hence, an interpretation of Neo-plasticism depends on the interpenetration of art and text. This disclosure underscores an interesting phenomenon concerning the relationship between non-figurative art and literature. When a pure painting, one which ostensibly makes a formal statement, endeavours to communicate certain ideas, it must do so through extra-pictorial means. Far from deleting literary and philosophical concepts, as Greenberg insists in 'Towards a Newer Laocoön' on behalf of his medium purity premise, much of the new art merely displaces these ideas outside the painting, though by no means in order to divest the work of them.<sup>19</sup> An ironic situation results, since *for Mondrian the newer Laocoön presupposes a newer Virgil*.

It becomes obvious that Greenbergian formalism is one of the more transparent myths of our epoch when we employ Barthes's definition of myth as depoliticised speech. To read the French semiologist's reasons is to read a recapitulation of our critique: 'Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives a natural and eternal justification ... myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences'.<sup>20</sup> Because modernist formalism has unremittingly obscured the political overtones in modernist art, it authenticates Barthes's position. Exemplary of this conclusion are standard explanations for the demise of the frame. A noteworthy tendency in twentieth-century art has been the negation of the aesthetic ambience segregating the art object from life, and promoting a disengaged, asocial reflection. As Walter Benjamin has noted of early movements such as the Dadists, of which van Doesburg was a member and later a member of *de Stijl*, they created objects which were useless for contemplative immersion. What they intended and achieved was a relentless destruction of the aura of their creations.<sup>21</sup> Unequivocally linked to this tradition of interrelating art and society was Mondrian's disuse of frames. Since his pictures were utopian enterprises conceived for the social enlightenment of humanity, their link with life was such that once they succeeded in reforming life, the two would become one. To him there was no artificial dichotomy involving a life and art that were divorced and coexistent. Mondrian claimed credit for being one of the first to disregard picture frames, because 'this consequence brings us, in a future perhaps remote, towards the end of *art as a*

18 Jaffé 1970, p. 10.

19 See Greenberg 1986a [1940], pp. 23–38.

20 Barthes, 1972, pp. 142–3.

21 Benjamin 1968, p. 237.

*thing separated from our surrounding environment* [his italics] ... Painting and sculpture will no longer manifest themselves as separate objects.'<sup>22</sup> In words somewhat reminiscent of Malraux, Meyer Schapiro has erroneously argued the opposite. Attributing the disuse of the frame to a desire for pictorial autonomy, Schapiro concluded that '[w]ithout a frame, the painting appears more completely and modestly the artist's work'.<sup>23</sup> However true this might be for another painter, it is not true for Mondrian, who considered himself a transmitter, not a creator, of preexistent hidden laws. Greenberg's related explanation of the jettisoning of frames as a declaration of the medium's independence and irreducibility provides us with yet another irony.<sup>24</sup> *As artists have deframed their works, formalist critics have metaphorically reframed them, thus constructing para-auras by means of desocialised interpretations.*

In order to avoid the travesty which results from purist examinations, methodological modifications are necessary. Since myth is less possible whenever one speaks in order to guide the transformation of reality, rather than to preserve it as an image of what it once was, the least mythic approach would not purge the *Kunstwollen* from the art it has conceived. One of the most significant contributions to methodology in this respect is the writings of Theodor Adorno, a leader of the Frankfurt School. Contending that the art work is a field of dynamic relations rather than an invariant entity, Adorno has observed that the object is far more comprehensible through 'social deciphering' than through connoisseur fetishising.<sup>25</sup> The German philosopher, or intellectual virtuoso as Susan Sontag has labelled him, does not revert to an archaic pre-Kantian outlook in order to reinvest the object with ontological independence from the subject. Nor does Adorno stop with the Copernican Revolution in philosophy, since his insistence on a speculative sensibility and the social field of force does not limit him to the outmoded subject-object conception of Kant or the idealistic framework of Hegel. 'Society is essentially process; its laws of movement

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22 Mondrian 1945, p. 63. Mondrian's assault on the frame for political reasons was one of the major precedents for this aspect of revolutionary art in 1968. The leftist critic Gilbert Lascault defined this significant relationship when he wrote on the praxis of painters in 1967–8: 'To contemplate the frame of a picture is already to interpret it as a constraint and to contest it ... frames are empty, like certain social frameworks ... The frame makes the picture into a show; it isolates it from its environment and offers it to the viewer as a thing apart. Engels reveals the ridiculous aspects of this show' (Lascault 1969, p. 64).

23 Schapiro 1972, p. 11.

24 Greenberg 1993a [1955], pp. 217–35.

25 Adorno 1959, p. 23.

tell more about it than whatever invariables might be deduced'.<sup>26</sup> His approach disallows conceptual totalities, because in Adorno's antisystem of art all aesthetic concepts are merely art categories, while in Hegel's philosophy of art, all art categories are aesthetic concepts. Furthermore, as Donald Kuspit has written, Adorno's dialectic 'precludes the naïve formalism of a Clement Greenberg or a Michael Fried, the belief that form is "objectively" nothing but itself, and that it is what art is ultimately about'.<sup>27</sup>

Avoided by Adorno's methodology is the contradiction intrinsic to the theoretical approach advocated by José Ortega y Gasset and the 'Critics of Consciousness', i.e., Marcel Raymond, Jean Starobinski, and the others associated with the Geneva School. Their goal in criticism is to attain a union of the critic's mind with that of the artist (though their concern is primarily with literature, Mondrian's numerous essays would qualify him for this specification) – a goal which is the antipode of a purely formalist approach. Because of the conflict between their aspirations and their projected means of attainment, Ortega y Gasset and the Geneva School are faced with a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, they contend that a self, subtracted from its circumstances, is a conceptual impossibility; on the other hand, they believe that in order for a critic to properly understand a work, he must approach it with an 'empty mind', one devoid of preconceptions.<sup>28</sup> If, however, an uncircumstantial self is implausible to Ortega y Gasset, the critic is denied the *tabula rasa* attitude that the Spanish philosopher has deemed imperative for comprehending a work itself unable to be understood outside of its historical context.<sup>29</sup> Adorno's method of inquiry obviates this inconsistency, since it does not assert that hyperempathy, 'pure' consciousness, any more than 'pure' formalism, leads to a conclusive knowledge of the art work. Because for Adorno art is always 'dialecticising' the spectator, to quote Kuspit, the artistic form never crystallises into a final truth about art.<sup>30</sup> (Dialectical thinking should be defined here as an effort to be both conscious and self-conscious, to consider one's own thoughts while in the act of thinking about an object.) The art object's significance is incessantly qualified anew owing to its continual requalification of the perceiver's awareness. Thus, the relationship of the viewer to his own circumstances which, of course, Ortega y Gasset conceded to be inextricably connected with the self, though he demanded the critic's extrication from them, is continually altered. However

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26 Adorno 1959, p. 144.

27 Kuspit 1975, p. 324.

28 Herzberger 1976, p. 456.

29 Herzberger 1976, p. 458.

30 Kuspit 1975, p. 324.

sophisticated their approach, the critics of consciousness are potential matriculants in the school of asocial thought because they seek contemplative immersion in circumstances other than their own.

Thus, our Diogenes' search for an interpretation of Mondrian will be related to aforementioned aspects of Adorno's methodology. As Fredric Jameson has shown, it is intended to project us into the real world, to eject us from any illusory order.<sup>31</sup> Fully aware that the authentic test of a nonsystematic approach is the self-reflexive questioning of its own presuppositions, we shall confront art, the *enfant terrible* in a systematic family.

## II

For it is the spirit of the times that determines artistic expression, which, in turn, reflects the spirit of the times ... that art alone is truly alive which expresses our present – our future – consciousness.

PIET MONDRIAN (1919)



Wilhelm Worringer's explanation of the urge to abstraction accounts at least in part for the iconoclastic character of Mondrian's art. According to *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908), a book highly acclaimed by such artists as Franz Marc, the less humanity has succeeded through cognition in establishing a rapport with the material world, the more forceful has been the impetus to artistic abstraction.<sup>32</sup> When in 1919 Mondrian elaborated on his 'turning away from the natural', he recognised that this was in accordance with the 'changed consciousness' of the modern person, itself a response to life's having become 'more positively abstract'.<sup>33</sup> The appearance of his art was as much the result of a metaphysical revolt, as his intention to go beyond painting was the consequence of a socio-economic rebellion. While Mondrian would definitely be among those whom John Berger has said opposed society's reification of art and its use of art as a cultural alibi, the Dutch painter's style was also conditioned

31 Jameson 1969, p. 142.

32 Worringer 1953, p. 53.

33 Mondrian 1956, pp. 142–4.



by scientific developments.<sup>34</sup> It was in his opinion, 'pure science and pure art, disinterested and free, that would revolutionize society'.<sup>35</sup> Thus, a dual abstinence was necessary, on the one hand from a society based on Veblen's notion of conspicuous consumption and on the other from a bankrupt artistic idiom that represented an out-dated *Weltanschauung*.

Demonstrative of Mondrian's belief that the modern sensibility had moved onto a more abstract plane were the discoveries of Planck, Einstein, Bohr, Heisenberg, etc. In developing a mathematical description of nature, physicists were forced to abandon the ordinary world of experience, the world of sense perception, to such an extent that events replaced things as the most concrete entities. Writing in 1925, at the time Mondrian was developing his mature phase, Bertrand Russell said that man's knowledge of the world was much more abstract than had ever seemed possible.<sup>36</sup> Writing in 1959, Russell said of his own response during these years that it had been profoundly ascetic, that he had sought refuge from the world in mathematics because it 'possesses not only truth, but supreme beauty – a beauty cold and austere ... such as only the greatest art can show'.<sup>37</sup> This view is strikingly similar not only to the outlook of de Stijl, but also to that of other groups such as Purism, the movement initiated by Ozenfant and Jeanneret (Le Corbusier), which was one of the more symptomatic of the period. In 1921, in 'Le Purisme', they said art should be radically economical and should induce 'a sensation of mathematical order'.<sup>38</sup> It should also be remembered that the starkly abstemious conduct favoured by Russell and for which Mondrian was well known was a sign of radicalism in the 1920s. Austerity of dress and taste caused leftists and *Wandervögel* to be distinguished by their conspicuous lack of consumption. A crew cut in this period had about the same connotations as did long hair in the 1960s, e.g., the locks of Che or the hirsute student radicals of 1968. As did Tatlin and the Constructivists, Mondrian both affirmed his optimistic faith in the disconcerting discoveries of science, along with his close relationship to the attitude of the intelligentsia, and contended that his works represented visual analogues to them: 'The exponent of non-figurative art associates himself with the most advanced progress and the most cultured minds ... he is an exponent of denaturalised nature'.<sup>39</sup> Like contemporary science, the Dutch master's works present us with a realm

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34 Berger 1975b, p. 202.

35 Mondrian 1945, p. 54.

36 Russell 1925, p. 142.

37 Russell 1961, p. 253.

38 LeCorbusier and Ozenfant 1964, pp. 61–3.

39 Mondrian 1945, p. 55.

that must be inferred, rather than perceived. Both invite the viewer to contemplation without 'representation'. Furthermore, the reductionist look reflects the austere outlook of the intelligentsia at this time.

The complete dehumanisation of art which José Ortega y Gasset considered fundamental to modern painting was, however, not the aim of Mondrian. Since his works were intended to convey through 'aesthetically purified' means 'a pure reflection of life in its deepest essence', they were supposed to do so 'without thereby renouncing the human element'.<sup>40</sup> While neoplasticism could not assume the form of organic reality – and hence is divested of corporeal associative values – it is nonetheless endowed with incorporeal values. Because it ignores the particulars of natural appearance, the neoplastic approach is, in a certain sense, pure art. In contradistinction, though, to Greenberg's idea of pure painting or Ortega y Gasset's concept of the ultra-object, Mondrian's art is chaste owing to the purity of its associations, not to the lack of any. A dialectic is posited in the Dutch artist's theory that precludes its being concerned only with aesthetically evocative overtones. The thesis is painting purged of contingent impurities; the antitheses is presumed universals extricated from sensory images. Therefore, their synthesis supposedly results in unsullied visual denominators of an immaterial realm of noncontingent forms. Though certainly not a neo-Hegelian, Mondrian's ideas about this duality in his works, as well as his conception of art as a means to self-consciousness, to disalienation, reflect ideas of the German philosopher that he incorporated into his own eclectic outlook. In fact, Mondrian confused on at least one occasion an idea from Hegel with the implications of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. A few years after a passage from *Phenomenology of the Spirit* was used in *de Stijl* – 'what is wrought in time, moves toward one aim, that the spirit be aware of itself, that it be objective to itself' – the Dutch painter mistakenly wrote that modern science had shown time to be 'an evolution from the individual towards the universal, of the subjective towards the objective'.<sup>41</sup> As Lincoln Barnett, Bertrand Russell, A.N. Whitehead and others have shown, the consequences of relativity, insofar as they can be interpreted scientifically, are that there is no longer a universal time. Since it has no independent existence apart from the particular order of events by which it is measured, time has lost its objectivity.

Mondrian's archaic ontological base was derived from leading theosophists of his day such as Steiner, Blavatsky, and Schoenmacker. The latter's *New Image*

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40 Mondrian 1956, p. 144.

41 Jaffé 1970, p. 54 is the location of the quotation from Hegel that appeared in the second issue of *De Stijl*. Mondrian 1945, p. 51 is the location of the second assertion.

*of the World* (1916) propagated such notions as the plastic regularity of nature, a universal law veiled within, which Mondrian obviously borrowed. Madame Blavatsky's *Iris Unveiled* (1877), another influential book for the Dutch painter's theory, extolled the significance of celestial perpendiculars created by the 'Geometrising Deity'.<sup>42</sup> It is not a little ironic that geometry was discredited as a separate science and merged into physics only a few years later. When the Michelson-Morley experiment disproved the objective validity of the circle and the straight line was displaced by the geodesic, classical geometry lost its two basic premises. Interestingly, the more science dematerialised the objectivity of the sensory world, the more Mondrian was allowed to indulge in his subjective flights.

The Dutch artist's belief in universal laws – a priori essences – veiled in nature and with an objective existence apart from sensory perception – evinces a prephenomenological use of metaphysics. For Edmund Husserl, Mondrian's older contemporary and the first to formulate a critique of cognition, or a phenomenology, philosophy's problem was no longer ontological, but epistemological. Though Husserl did seek 'essences', he considered them to have no existence, only validity. (It should of course be remembered that later thinkers using a phenomenological method, e.g., Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and most recently Jacques Derrida in his brilliant critique of Husserl's approach, have long since ceased searching for 'essences'.) To Husserl the question of where these 'essences' might exist was irrelevant, while to Mondrian, for whom they had objective existence in nature, the question was very significant for his art, if equally insignificant for philosophy. Phenomenology has focused its interest increasingly from a study of outward reality to an examination of human inner consciousness of this reality as the only knowable quantity, the only ultimate truth – a view antithetical to Mondrian's. It was his anachronistic outlook that allowed the Dutch artist to maintain *operari sequitur esse*, rather than vice versa, the phenomenological position asserted by Merleau-Ponty when he stated that conception does not precede execution.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, Mondrian's refusal to accept what Malraux has termed the aftermath of the absolute led him to a singular position. His acceptance of science and technology was progressive; his theoretical premises were reactionary – ontologically, though not socially – and their visual results were revolutionary. Significantly, it is precisely this preoccupation with a prephenomenological framework of forms that provides the justification in his art both for the nonorganic qual-

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42 James 1964, p. 105, and Welsh 1971, p. 48.

43 Merleau-Ponty 1964a, p. 19.

ies, potentially an autonomous trait, and the socially reformatory dimension, seemingly a nonautonomous trait. This dialectic of pure form and chaste content allows Mondrian to theoretically, though not necessarily visually, circumvent the disengaged position of abstraction for the sake of abstraction. He would not be classified with the exponents of *l'art pour l'art* whom Nietzsche had in mind when he spoke of certain crypto-nihilists who take refuge in the beauty of form.<sup>44</sup>

Whether or not Whitehead was right when he said that the safest generalisation about European philosophy is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato, Michel Seuphor, Hans Jaffé, and every other art historian to write on Mondrian have been wrong to classify Mondrian's theories as Platonic. 'Natural Reality and Abstract Reality', a dialogue by Mondrian which Seuphor erroneously labels 'pure Platonic dialectics',<sup>45</sup> consistently maintains the neo-Aristotelian view that universals exist within nature where they appear under a veil, rather than a priori to and independent of nature as they would in a Platonic framework. In fact, Mondrian tacitly disallowed Seuphor's statement when he wrote, in 'Plastic Art and Pure Plastic Art': 'It is necessary to stress the fact that these laws are more or less hidden behind the superficial aspect of nature ... Abstract art is therefore opposed to a natural representation of things. But it is not opposed to nature as is generally thought'.<sup>46</sup>

This position towards nature taken by Mondrian is quite significant, however naïve philosophically, since it reflects a break with the *fin de siècle* retreat from life endorsed by G. Albert Aurier and other neo-platonic critics, in favour of *l'esprit nouveau* championed by Apollinaire and those who avidly sought to reform life through art. Far from rejecting nature, as did the Platonists, de Stijl, like science, would select from and manipulate nature, by revealing the universals presumed to be in it, so that humans 'will not always remain dominated by uncontrolled Nature'.<sup>47</sup> No longer the foe of science, art was to become the collaborator of technology – a view in keeping with Apollinaire's belief that Einstein was the supreme poet of his era. As Meyer Schapiro has incisively shown, it was precisely because technology was conceived abstractly as an independent force with its own inner conditions – with the engineer being the real creator of the world – that the transition to the 'more technological style' of the 1920s occurred.<sup>48</sup> It was widespread for artists to view their work

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44 Nietzsche 1930, p. 288.

45 Seuphor 1956, p. 320.

46 Mondrian 1945, p. 54.

47 Mondrian 1945, p. 31.

48 Schapiro 1978 [1937], pp. 185–211.

as the aesthetic counterpart to the abstract calculations of the engineer and the scientist. Unlike the Futurist's fanciful adulation of machines, de Stijl, the Purists, Léger, etc. wished to reconstruct culture through the logic of technique and design, thus considering themselves aesthetic prophets of a new order. The Bolshevik revolution was supported by some; many more collaborated with the socio-democratic and liberal reformist architects of Germany and Holland.

According to Schapiro, their conception of technology in art was largely conditioned by two factors: First, the stringent rationalisation of industry in post-war Europe aimed at reducing costs and widening markets as the only hope of a capitalism that was strangling. Secondly, the reformist illusion that the technological advance by raising living standards would resolve the class conflict, or at least form in the technicians' habits of economic planning that would be conducive to a peaceful transition to socialism. Hence, it is hardly incidental that Le Corbusier's slogan during this period was 'Architecture or Revolution!';<sup>49</sup> that there was a revival of interest in the schemes of Charles Fourier; that Georges Duhamel and Jules Romain, the two most often read French novelists of the decade, emphasised the artist's duty to live as one of the community and to speak on the people's behalf; or that Mondrian believed neo-plasticism and the new science would completely reform the world for humanity's benefit. Certainly one could safely assert that the avant-garde of the 1920s was one of the more emphatically utopian ventures in the history of Western art – using the word 'utopian' as did Engels when he spoke of those who 'do not claim to emancipate a particular class to begin with, but all humanity at once'.<sup>50</sup>

Mondrian's pictures, delineative as they are of this reformist fervour, are examples of what Adorno has termed 'committed art'. Distinguishing genuinely *engagé* art from tendentious propaganda, the German philosopher said that committed art was intended neither to generate legislative acts nor practical institutions, but to work 'at the level of fundamental attitudes'. As, however, Adorno further observed, the aesthetic advantages of commitment, as opposed to mere tendentiousness, render the content 'inherently ambiguous'.<sup>51</sup> While Mondrian believed in the utility of art and was devoted to social reform through the aesthetic mode, the abstruse nature of his art restricted his paintings to an audience consisting primarily of those aristocrats of the spirit earlier championed by Baudelaire. On the one hand, Mondrian asserted that 'if the public

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49 Ibid.

50 Engels 1959 [1880], p. 71.

51 Adorno 1974a, p. 78.

is to be well-informed and if mankind is to progress it is essential (for everyone) to know the laws and culture of plastic art'.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, he believed that to endeavour to make art comprehensible to all was 'to attempt the impossible', since 'although the new art is necessary, the mass is conservative'. His conclusion was that the 'search for a content which is collectively understandable is false; the content will always be individual'.<sup>53</sup> This last statement represents nothing less than a self-refutation of the purported universality of his art. Were his images really representative of objective forms innate in nature, his art should perform a maieutic role by eliciting recollections of these preexistent ideas. The Dutch artist's concession that his content is not universally transmutable axiomatically undermines its metaphysical import, as well as some of its reformatory dimensions, since as he stated content and form in neo-plasticism are an 'inseparable unity'.<sup>54</sup> Therefore associative values in his paintings, far from being of crystalline clarity, partake of an almost Heracleitian obscurity. That Mondrian felt compelled to explain his content in print, represents a tacit acknowledgement that his egalitarian end was not totally compatible with his potentially elitist means. This recognition leads us to a fundamental observation about the relationship of all art to social change; namely, there is no everlastingly revolutionary art, there is only continually revolutionary art criticism. (The efforts by Hugh Honour and others to bowdlerise politically Jacques-Louis David's work and the Rockefellers's purchase of art made by friends of Trotsky, the Surrealists, who were supposedly committed to his goals, prove this point.) The extent to which art maintains its place as an indicator of social consciousness is totally contingent on the authenticity of the critic's approach. *Consummation of committed art is an unending process, the responsibility for which rests with each new generation which must continually complete what the artist has only begun.*

### III

Having discussed the theoretical composition of Mondrian's art, we shall now examine with authentic lucidity, rather than formal opacity, a mature work, the *Composition in Red, Blue, and Yellow* (1930). To be sure, the theosophical views of the Dutch painter have in part determined its appearance. Avoiding

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52 Mondrian 1945, p. 53.

53 Mondrian 1945, p. 62.

54 Mondrian 1945, p. 63.

the static balance of his painting from 1919–20, this work realises his concept of dynamic equilibrium through the adroit placement of unequal colour blocks. He demonstrates a knowledge of the relationship between colour value and visual weight, since as Albers has shown in the *Interaction of Colour*, quantity is quality. The canvas has been utterly 'denaturalised' through the omission of any curves, tints, indeterminate lines, or ill-defined shapes such as those which appeared in his earlier cubist-influenced paintings. An advance over his grid paintings from the early twenties can be seen in the elimination of achromatic greys which have a somewhat fugitive character, hence would be incompatible with his timeless intent. Such colouristic phenomena as the optical mixture of colour, the so-called Bezold effect, which would have underscored the relativity of colour, and thus the objects portrayed, are discreetly disallowed through virile and utterly uniform border lines – lines that isolate the hues and maintain an austere purity for them. The right angle, the shape Mondrian considered to be the primordial relation unifying nature, is here employed to unify the field of triadic primary hues and white.

There is much more, however. Roland Barthes has shown that a dominant tendency in modernist writing, e.g., that of Camus, Sartre, or Robbe-Grillet, has been the search for a neutral style, a transparent form of 'styleless' writing which would make the author irretrievably honest. According to Barthes, the search for a zero level represents the anticipation of a homogeneous social state.<sup>55</sup> The radical neutrality of Mondrian's socially engaged art is another case in point. 'To have emotion aroused by pure plastic expression', he wrote, 'one must abstract from figuration and so become neutral ... The less obvious the artist's hand the more objective will the work be.'<sup>56</sup> Because in his view, his work depended on its veracity about preexistent laws, he felt that art would lose its social import if it were based on a subjective presentation. Although the French novelists have sought neutrality for its concreteness, while Mondrian endorsed it for its presumed universality, both have considered 'styleless' art a means of *engagé*.

Intimately related to the appearance of Mondrian's work is what Lewis Mumford has termed the 'neutral realm of nature'<sup>57</sup> established by the neotechnic age. New aesthetic facts have resulted: to look for gradation and atmosphere in the new technological environment is to miss the cool, metallic clarity and the unnatural precision that has emanated with the use of mechanical forms

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55 Barthes 1983, p. 87.

56 Mondrian 1945, p. 62.

57 Mumford 1934, p. 324.

and electrical modes of lighting. Special visual effects of repeating patterns, of calculated units and series dealing with interchangeable components have emerged. There can be no doubt that Mondrian was striving for similar effects in the work under analysis. The painter who turned his back on trees when sitting in Parisian cafés and who praised New York for its lack of visible nature has given us striking examples of the Baudelairian delight in the beauty of one's own circumstances. Furthermore, the machine-like look of his pictures underscores their utopian aim. The artist who believed in the collaboration of science and art was no doubt well informed about how this mission should proceed. As Whitehead emphasised in 1925, the reason we are on a higher scientific and technological level is not because of finer imagination, but better instruments – 'These instruments have put thought on to a new level'.<sup>58</sup> Mondrian's paintings, such as his *Composition* of 1930, were designed as nothing less than machines for reform, as instruments for enlightenment.

To look at this work in a multifaceted manner is to see far more than at first sight one is capable of seeing – an emphatic political statement; a visual analogue for an abstract world; a panegyric about technological accomplishments; a naïve belief in the perfectibility of the future; a delight in a mechanised environment, and also the highly personal vision (all the more so owing to its distinctive impersonality) of a quixotic figure who, in the aftermath of the absolute, neither painted icons of an ideal realm, nor succeeded in leading people to a privileged place in it. To view this work is an ironic recognition that Mondrian's quest for an ahistorical location can only be understood with reference to his historical situation. If as Malraux once said, one's questions are worth more than the answers, we should add that one's aspirations are frequently more important than the attainments.

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58 Whitehead 1925, p. 114.



## Charles Biederman and Art Theory

The paintings of Claude Monet revolutionised modern art in Biederman's opinion. By being the first to fully engage 'in the creative utilisation of nature's colour-building-method',<sup>1</sup> Monet dealt in a new way with the structuring process of light, namely, how light and the perceiver bring things into focus. In Biederman's opinion, however, Monet's Impressionism was brought to 'fuller consciousness' in Cézanne's compositions.<sup>2</sup> Cézanne supposedly made 'the Structurist direction definitive by using a pictorial arrangement' later known as Cubism, but for the express purpose of creating a method of analysis with which he could structurally investigate nature as a creative process.<sup>3</sup>

There is justification for Biederman's interpretation of Monet's pictures, though not for his limitation of Monet's paintings to this mode of interpretation. Monet's major cycles from the 1890s, such as the twenty scenes of Rouen Cathedral (1895) or the fifteen renditions of haystacks (1891) – one version of which hung in reproduction in Biederman's office when I interviewed him in 1976 – are extended essays in the formative quality of light. A new expression of form as inextricably connected to its ephemeral contexts is present in these works, as Monet himself affirmed in a letter (7 October 1890):

I am working terribly hard, struggling with a series of different effects (haystacks), but ... the sun sets so fast that I cannot follow it ... I am beginning to work so slowly that I am desperate, but the more I continue, the more I see that a great deal of work is necessary in order to succeed in rendering that which I seek: 'instantaneity', especially the 'envelope', the same light spreading everywhere.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Biederman 1948, p. 268.

2 Biederman 1948, p. 293.

3 Biederman 1965, p. 35. Cézanne's connection with Cubism remains however, a matter of controversy.

4 Geffroy 1924, p. 189 as cited by Seitz 1960, p. 25. Monet was responsible for at least eight major series, starting with the fifteen Haystacks (1891). Kermit Champa has contended, however, that the snowscapes Monet executed in 1867 must be seen as the first of Monet's series paintings. See Champa 1973, p. 15. Furthermore, Steven Z. Levine has noted that Monet's 'first publicly exhibited series ensemble' was the group of nine paintings of Gare Saint Lazare

Furthermore, the palette of Monet and the other Impressionists apparently tended toward exceptionally bright colour because of its traditional association with sunlight. Two techniques characteristic of Impressionism – the use of strongly contrasting pure hues and the use of colour of a light tonality limited in both value and hue contrast – were very specifically associated with outdoor light, as well as with the more general concept of *clarté*.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike most earlier art, Biederman's reliefs are not made merely with respect to how light will inevitably affect them, nor are they concerned with *depicting* a play of light now past. His reliefs are designed to accentuate the *actual* play of sunlight so that natural light is not just another aspect to be considered, but the main thing to be observed. Most other artists have created objects which happen to reflect light, while Biederman is concerned with natural light which happens to be reflected by objects. His aesthetic achievement resides as much in how he orchestrates lighting and colour, as in the 'quality' of the reliefs he makes. Since, however, the deftness with which he handles light is dependent on the structure of these reliefs, Biederman can hardly be indifferent to the forms these reliefs assume. His reliefs are usually spray-painted with 'spectral' colours using a warm to cool progression rather than one going from light to dark.<sup>6</sup> The tonal darkness in his work is contingent on the strength of the sun's light. When on one occasion I saw Biederman's work on an overcast day, there was a slowly revolving mechanical light focused on some of his reliefs. In this way the effect of sunlight was simulated, yet at a brisker pace. Nonetheless, natural lighting is what Biederman insists must be used, so that electrical lighting is only a temporary surrogate. This transformation of forms because of sunlight entailed in Biederman's reliefs unquestionably recalls, as do titles of his work like *Giverny*, the serial paintings of Monet. An important difference, however, is that one Biederman relief, owing to the continually *direct* role of light in it, is an open-ended series, while a closed series by Monet consists of several works expressing a definite number of 'instantaneities' rendered with infinite subtlety.

Just as Monet once wrote 'that he who claims to have finished a canvas is a terrible boaster',<sup>7</sup> so Biederman has intentionally constructed reliefs which,

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which were shown together in 1877. See Levine 1978, p. 443. For an informative look at Monet's technique, see Herbert 1979, pp. 90–108.

5 Shiff 1973, p. 73.

6 This 'spectral' palette was used by Cézanne and the Impressionists. See Shiff 1973, p. 75.

7 Geffroy 1922, p. 194. Also Seitz 1960, p. 32. A comparable position concerning 'finish' was expressed by the Abstract Expressionists, in particular Barnett Newman, who said: 'the idea

because of the transitory yet intrinsic role of light, are never 'finished'. It is for this reason that Biederman refers to the 'realisation', not the 'perfection' of his reliefs.<sup>8</sup> Since new configurations and colours are realised by a shift in the direction and intensity of lighting, as well as in spectator movement, there is no final composition into which they crystallise. This 'incomplete' quality of Biederman's work conveys a major tenet of his position. In a June 1972 letter to the editor of *Artforum*, Biederman presented his views aptly while responding to an article by William Seitz in which Biederman's theory was mentioned (*Artforum* – February 1972). Since Seitz maintained that Biederman had merely used the 'metaphysical principles' of Mondrian 'without fundamental change',<sup>9</sup> Biederman explained why he had in fact 'arrived at the rejection of the "metaphysical principles" which Mondrian adopted':

[T]he influence of Mondrian upon my work begun in 1936 and ended in 1947 ... I could not accept Mondrian's rejection of the 'optical' perception of nature as a paradigm for what is to me the only viable reality available to art ... In my view the seemingly inexhaustible creative structure given by nature makes nonsense out of anyone's conjuration of any absolute for the structure of art. I choose to follow not Mondrian, but the course of nature, as did Monet and Cézanne. That is, I see the future of new art as a *creative structural evolution*, as nature seems to appear and so make possible for art.<sup>10</sup>

This opposition to absolute values and metaphysical systems reminds us of Monet's caveat that one should not wish to reduce the world to their measure.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, we can also understand Biederman's affinity with Cézanne. As has been emphasised recently, the compositional shifts in Cézanne's paintings seem to reflect his concern with a 'continual immediacy'.<sup>12</sup> An interest in the life of sensation as an on-going process led him to consider his own work unfinished. Forever approaching nature anew, Cézanne complained of being unable

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of a "finished" picture is a fiction'. See the discussion of 'finish' in Motherwell and Reinhardt 1951, pp. 11–12.

8 Sjöberg 1977, p. 26.

9 Seitz 1972, p. 70.

10 Biederman 1972, p. 7. Seitz's rejoinder to this letter was very disappointing. While he admitted that he had been mistaken about Biederman's theories, he stated nevertheless that he still felt Biederman's art was 'entirely divorced from nature'.

11 Clemenceau 1928, p. 101.

12 Shiff 1978, p. 794.

to 'arrive at the intensity which unfolds before my senses; I do not have the magnificent richness of colour which animates nature'.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, Cézanne's later work can be viewed as a cumulative perception involving numerous views and times. Cézanne's use in the same picture of different spatial and experienced times would relate even more to the incessant qualification of a Biederman relief through variable sunlight, and various experiences of the viewers, than would the 'instantaneities' in a succession of canvases by Monet. This perceptual interest of Biederman allows us to appreciate his belief that Cézanne's concern 'was, first of all, to comprehend the truth of Impressionism as, in his understanding, Monet alone achieved it'.<sup>14</sup>

In his art, Biederman has been concerned with the relationship of the perceiver to the perceived. Dismissing what he called the 'over-empirical' view of perception as the mere passive recording of natural effects, Biederman has contended that perception is 'a joint phenomenon of the observer and the observed'.<sup>15</sup> To him the object seen and the visualisation of it are 'different, but related events'.<sup>16</sup> This view of perception extends beyond the objective/subjective interpretation of Impressionism: 'Reality came to be equated with consciousness, and as we have seen the primordial act of consciousness was the perceiving of the impression; the impression was neither subject nor object, but both the source of their identities and the product of their interaction'.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, we are reminded by Biederman's synthetic view of the position common to Cézanne and Zola – the notion of art as nature seen through a temperament.<sup>18</sup> Not surprisingly, Biederman conceives his aim to be comparable with the one he attributes to Cézanne. This goal involves the creative expression of 'man's amalgamation with nature'.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to emphasise the perceptual affinity between Biederman's views and those of Monet and Cézanne, because in the past two decades Biederman's ideas have changed. He now considers the three books he has written to be flawed by excessive theorising. When in 1976 the author wrote to Biederman about theoretical views, he received this warning in a return letter: 'Theory must always rest in its derivation from as much as possible, the unprejudiced

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13 Cézanne to his son, 8 September 1906 in Rewald 1937, p. 288.

14 Biederman 1965, p. 35.

15 Biederman 1948, p. 31.

16 Ibid.

17 Shiff 1978a, p. 362.

18 Shiff 1978b, p. 791: 'It should be evident that in its most distilled form, Cézanne's "theory" of art corresponds to Zola's basic notion: art is nature seen through a temperament'.

19 Biederman 1958, p. 25.

perception of nature ... Above all I try to avoid being conditioned to any of my own views in order to be free of any perceptual prejudices'.<sup>20</sup> *Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge* (1948) and *The New Cézanne* (1958) are now considered wrong by Biederman, *except insofar as their content relates to the experience of his reliefs*. During 1978 the author wrote to Biederman that *The New Cézanne* was incorrect because in it he had relied on the Symbolist ideas of Emile Bernard and Joaquim Gasquet. Biederman responded that recognising the implausibility of his book 'could easily be done by referring to Cézanne's actual works and exposing my judgements'.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Biederman had made this position clearly when he wrote in *Artforum* (1965): 'This new vision of nature and art cannot be comprehended verbally. One must reach understanding of the new vision visually'.<sup>22</sup>

In *Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge*, Biederman wrote one of the longest histories of art by any artist, since Lorenzo Ghiberti started this genre in modern times. This study was influenced by Alfred North Whitehead, Bertrand Russell, Henri Poincaré, Jean Piaget, Kurt Koffka, and numerous others. Understandably, this book is very eclectic. It is heavily burdened by concepts and ideas which do not really relate to the art of 'structural process' which he advocates. On the one hand, art is seen as a process of perceptual refinement, and as 'one of the most profound means of man's disposal for comprehending reality'.<sup>23</sup> In addition, he states that we should recognise the 'multi-ordinality of the word "art"', because 'Nature reveals far more possibilities to the artist than will ever be contained in any theory of absolutes'.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, however, Biederman presents a narrow concept of art history as one involving greater and greater 'realism'. This simple view is predicated on the convoluted neurophysiological ideas of Alfred Korzybski. The evolution of art is divided into three major stages: (1) the Pre-Aristotelian period when people were 'predominately thalamic' so that the cortex operated in a limited way; (2) the Aristotelian period (from Classical Greece to Impressionism) when there was 'a greater reliance upon the "new brain" or cortical area'; (3) the present or Non-Aristotelian period 'characterised by psychologies of the most advanced know-

20 Letter to the author from Biederman (dated November 22, 1976).

21 Letter to the author from Biederman (dated November 30, 1978). See Theodore Reff's discussion of how Cézanne's ideas have been misconstrued by Symbolists like Emile Bernard in Reff 1977, pp. 7–48.

22 Biederman 1965, p. 37.

23 Biederman 1948, p. x. Also, see Bryson 1978, pp. 37–45: 'With Hazlitt one encounters for the first time the claim that the function of the visual artists is to refine perception'.

24 Biederman 1948, p. 9.

ledge in Science'.<sup>25</sup> In spite of Biederman's emphasis in his art on the subjectivity of all perception, this historical formula restricts art to the expression of a

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- 25 Biederman 1948, pp. 623–4. The obsession of Biederman with going beyond 'Aristotelian' aesthetics is probably related to a statement by Bertrand Russell in a book which is included in Biederman's bibliography. In his *A History of Western Philosophy*, Russell wrote: '[A]fter his death it was two thousand years before the world produced any philosopher who could be regarded as approximately his equal. Towards the end of this long period his authority became almost as unquestioned as that of the Church ... Ever since the Seventeenth century, almost every serious intellectual advance has had to begin with an attack on some Aristotelian doctrine; in his logic, this is still true at the present day' (Russell 1945, pp. 159–60). Biederman's basic presupposition was that Aristotle had dominated aesthetics and still continued to do so, as he did logic before Russell's revisions of the syllogism. This is, of course, nonsense. Logic, as founded by Aristotle (for example the deductive syllogism) has in fact changed little, while art has done little else.

Although Aristotle's views have influenced Western art, they have not led to the creation of 'Aristotelian' art. The extraordinary range of works influenced by his thought makes this clear: Dante's *Divine Comedy* with its views of the cosmos derived from the neo-Aristotelian scholasticism of St. Thomas Aquinas; some of Giorgio Vasari's ideas, for example, on melancholia; the eclectic philosophy of Marsilio Ficino and Piero della Mirandola, with its implications for Botticelli and Michelangelo; the Academic Classicism of Boileau, Racine and LeBrun during the seventeenth century when Aristotle's *Poetics* was most revered; and eighteenth-century classicism, in Sir Joshua Reynolds's *Discourses*. After the foundation, for example, of aesthetics in the eighteenth century, as well as Kant's writings on the subject, Aristotle's influence was hardly a dominant element. Even earlier, however, when Aristotle was a factor, his thought helped formulate systems that ultimately diverged from his own. To underscore only that Aristotle was used, rather than how, is to miss everything that was unique to these periods. (See Panofsky 1968, or Lee 1967.)

Russell's influence, in this respect, was probably only minor when compared to another source. The most pervasive reason for Biederman's misinterpretation of Aristotle was undoubtedly the thought of Alfred Korzybski, with whom Biederman studied in 1938 at the Institute of General Semantics in Chicago. Korzybski designated himself the editor of the International Non-Aristotelian Library, for which Biederman's book was probably intended. With repeated turgidity, Korzybski said that he created the 'first non-aristotelian system of semantics'. (See Korzybski 1933, p. vii.) It should be recalled that one of the interesting mannerisms in this period was to label something non-Euclidean, non-Newtonian, non-aristotlelian, et al. (Bertolt Brecht, for example, spoke of his own 'non-Aristotelian' plays.) The 'System of General Semantics', as Korzybski termed it, supposedly refuted the 'Aristotelian codifications' of words into a 'Two-valued either-or type of orientation' (which, of course, had dominated semantics for two thousand years after Aristotle!). Furthermore, he tells us, several years after Edmund Husserl undermined the possibility of such a view, that '[t]he non-aristotelian system presented here has turned out to be a strictly empirical science, as predicted' (Korzybski 1933, p. x).

supposedly objective, materialist evolution in human vision. Thus, he equates significant art with the most 'realistic' art of a period. This art documents in aesthetic terms each new advance in seeing. According to Biederman's thesis, the purpose of art from Classical Greece to Impressionism involved increasing verisimilitude in the imitation of the 'macro-level' of nature. In turn, Greek art represents the first stage in a development leading beyond the 'Pre-Aristotelian' period initiated by Palaeolithic artists and further advanced by the Egyptians.<sup>26</sup> All cultures are classified by Biederman as either repressive or non-repressive on the basis of whether or not they foster the 'free' expression by artists of each new stage in the supposed evolution of sight. The history of a period is thus obscured by Biederman's historical schema. As a result, Biederman dismisses the 'anti-realism' of the Middle Ages as a temporary negation of what had been achieved in Antiquity, yet was to remain dormant until the Renaissance took up inevitably where Greco-Roman culture had stopped. He regards Giotto, for example, as an important reflection of how strongly totalitarian the Christian theocracy had been, rather than as an artist who made great advances in 'realism'.<sup>27</sup>

Just as he locates all art in a triadic sequence consisting of three major periods, Biederman contends that each period features a dominant medium because it is the one that is most 'realistic' at the time. These three major art forms purportedly express mankind's evolution in perception: from tactile proficiency to visual mastery, then a level characterised by both. This idea is based on the Gestalt observation that we see in three dimensions before seeing in only two.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, Biederman extrapolates incorrectly that humans have been unable 'to translate or transpose the tactile knowledge of the object into the laws which govern human skills'.<sup>29</sup> Sculpture was therefore the dominant art form from Palaeolithic times to Donatello, because in Biederman's view it was most effective in imitating the 'macro-level' of nature. After Donatello, however, painting supposedly gained ascendancy, because painters dealt with light, as well as with tectonic forms. Indirectly reopening the old Renaissance debates concerning which medium was superior, Biederman derives support for his thesis from Leonardo's arguments in *Paragone*.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately overlooking the technical virtuosity with which Baroque sculptors such as Bernini

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26 Biederman 1948, p. 125.

27 Biederman 1948, p. 157.

28 Biederman 1948, p. 30. Biederman quotes Kurt Koffka in his book and he corresponded with Max Wertheimer at one time.

29 Ibid.

30 da Vinci 1956, pp. 90–109.

aped nature (sometimes actively including natural light in multi-media complexes), Biederman contends that painting best conveyed the neurophysiological evolution in human vision from after Donatello till Impressionism.<sup>31</sup>

Later, the invention of the camera was one of the reasons painting purportedly assumed a secondary position among media. Since the camera is supposedly 'Nature made to do its own work',<sup>32</sup> Biederman argues that the 'Aristotelian' concern with mimesis on the 'macro-level' of reality can most perfectly be achieved by photography. Courbet was the last important realist; the Impressionists were the first to revolutionise art by redefining its relationship to nature. In contradistinction to all other artists from Antiquity to Courbet, the Impressionists were supposedly interested in the structuring process of light which brings things into focus, rather than with the objects which resulted from this process. Owing to the invention of the camera, the discoveries of Chevreul, neurophysiological advances in vision, and breakthroughs of modern science making life more 'abstract', the subject of art became inevitably, for Biederman, the various perceptual factors of sight, instead of the record of things seen.<sup>33</sup> This is why, he maintains, the Impressionists were concerned with 'the creative utilisation of nature's *colour-building-method*'.<sup>34</sup> Post-Impressionists then supposedly made advances by taking Monet's colour achievements as a point of departure. Van Gogh made 'more conscious the linear contour organisation of colour shapes on a flat surface', while Gauguin showed a greater degree of self-consciousness about the 'shape-divisions of colour-shaped organisation'.<sup>35</sup> Cézanne brought to 'fuller consciousness', however, the structural developments of nature. Concerning the 'ambiguities' in Cézanne's explanation of his art, Biederman considers this trait a positive sign of Cézanne's disinclination to theorise about an art arrived at through experience.<sup>36</sup>

His discussion of these artists is obviously not a formalist interpretation, yet Biederman subtly reconciles formal self-consciousness with the transcription of nature's structural process. Realising what Ogden Rood first noted, that colours formed by paint recording natural light differ markedly from colours formed by natural light, Biederman underscores a preoccupation with the

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31 Biederman 1948, pp. 166–79.

32 Biederman 1948, p. 231.

33 Biederman 1948, p. 268.

34 Ibid.

35 Biederman 1948, p. 282. Biederman has changed his opinion about the accomplishments of Gauguin and Van Gogh. Now he sees their work as an unduly subjective use of Monet's technique, in other words as a dead end.

36 Biederman 1948, pp. 293–94.



medium – given its unnaturalness – as a major factor in the new art.<sup>37</sup> Thus, Biederman avoids the formalist over-emphasis on the *all importance* of self-consciousness about the medium, yet he is able to consider it a major concern entirely reconcilable with the formative roles of light and colour in nature.

One of the most intelligent sections of Biederman's book is his explanation of how structurist art is 'realistic', in spite of its 'abstractness'. Concerning abstraction, Biederman states that 'John Dewey, in his *Art As Experience*, has made a more concerted effort than the author has been able to find in any other book to explain the functioning of the abstracting process in art'.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, Biederman believes that Dewey's position cannot go unqualified since Dewey's notion that all art abstracts from reality to 'different degrees' seems to him inadequate. Rather, Biederman says that in fact 'the problem of abstraction is a matter of abstracting from *different levels* of nature's reality'.<sup>39</sup> Far from dealing with things as more or less recognisable, i.e., 'abstract', art can also deal with how things are recognised. Most artists abstract 'in a greater or lesser degree from the macroscopic level'. Some, like himself however, seek to 'abstract directly from the *STRUCTURAL PROCESS LEVEL* of reality'.<sup>40</sup> Thus, Biederman believes he has advanced the aims of Monet and Cézanne by focusing even more closely on the formative role of light. In order to deal more exclusively with the light before it 'forms' objects, Biederman has eliminated landscape configurations.

Cubism represents a 'unique climax' in art history for Biederman as for Theo van Doesburg and Naum Gabo, both of whom he quotes. Cubist painters supposedly strove to use the 'structural factors of visual phenomena'.<sup>41</sup> Implicit in Biederman's position is a correlation of this new artistic interest in the 'abstract' structuring process of nature with the contemporary transition of science to an abstract, mathematically descriptive realm of events, rather than objects.<sup>42</sup> This conception of art's relationship to the new scientific ideas of nature derives from Biederman's extensive reading of studies by Poincaré, Whitehead, and Russell.<sup>43</sup>

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37 Biederman 1948, p. 263.

38 Biederman 1948, p. 342.

39 Biederman 1948, p. 344.

40 Biederman 1948, p. 343.

41 Biederman 1948, p. 313.

42 Another article concerning this correspondence is Leo Steinberg's 'The Eye is Part of the Mind' (Steinberg 1972, p. 305).

43 In 1976 Biederman told me that he had read all of Alfred North Whitehead's books and that they influenced him considerably. Three of Whitehead's books are in Biederman's bibliography: *Science and the Modern World* (1925), *Process and Reality* (1930), and *Adventures in*

Those who, in Biederman's view, realised the next step in expressing the structural process – though they supposedly had an 'inadequate consciousness' of this fact – were the 'Two Dimensionalists', namely, the De Stijl Group and the Suprematists.<sup>44</sup> While they did eradicate the last vestiges of 'macro-level' realism from their canvases, these painters did not make the transition to another medium that would convey 'the structural element of *actual* three dimensions'.<sup>45</sup> For Biederman, Malevich's *White on White*, as an 'empty canvas', was a metaphor for the demise of painting as a 'useful' medium and Mondrian was the 'last great painter'.<sup>46</sup> Mondrian is significant for having correlated art and science as agents for a new social order and for emphasising 'the great hidden laws of nature', which Biederman relates erroneously (in this book though not in his later studies) to his own notion of structural process.<sup>47</sup>

Although Biederman's discussion of De Stijl and Suprematism shows a better effort to locate these artists historically than is the case with his treatment of most earlier artists, this interpretation is characterised also by a misreading of history. Painters such as Malevich were not merely concerned with going beyond painting, but beyond art itself into a presumed a-historical realm or into a future historical location. Avant-garde movements have been concerned with advancing a new style for life through art, rather than just a new medium for art. Unquestionably this is true of Mondrian who predicted the superfluity of fine arts, because we will 'live in realised art'.<sup>48</sup> A major consequence of this modern trend has been a self-conscious preoccupation with the limitations of art in general, not merely of particular media. This tendency achieved striking realisation in the 1960s with the 'dematerialisation' of art objects in Conceptual Art, Art Povera, and Earthworks. (Ironically, Biederman's reliefs, which are intended to be machine-reproducible, relate to these egalitarian and art desanctifying movements.) Unfortunately, Biederman's consideration of modern art primarily with regard to the structural process of nature reduces art conceptually, even while trying to expand it perceptually.

'Constructionism', as opposed to Constructivism, is the term Biederman uses in this book for his and related art. In 1952 he coined 'Structurism' to replace

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*Ideas* (1933). Also included in his bibliography are two books by Bertrand Russell: *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945) and *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (1940); as well as two books by Henri Poincaré: *The Value of Science* and *The Foundations of Science*.

44 Biederman 1948, p. 376.

45 Ibid.

46 Biederman 1948, p. pp. 364–71.

47 Biederman 1948, p. 376.

48 Mondrian 1945, p. 32.

it, although in 1970 he dropped this label as well, in favour of the 'New Art'. The major precursors of his own art were the Russian Constructivists, because of their 'wider consciousness of the world', their 'sociological and scientific attitudes', and the 'revolutionary environment' which spawned them.<sup>49</sup> In *Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge* (1948) – although not in his later studies – Biederman has high praise for Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner, and he relates the Constructivists' work to the structural process of nature. Even though he endorses their use of new industrial materials, however, he disagrees with their decision to transform sculpture, rather than to adopt what Biederman considers a new medium – constructionist reliefs.<sup>50</sup> Their 'failure' to create a different medium causes Biederman to see them increasingly as reactionary figures.<sup>51</sup>

In the last section of *Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge* Biederman advocates machine-reproducible art as a means to circumventing the commercialisation and the cultural restriction of art. In addition, he argues that mass-produced art will bring an end to museums.<sup>52</sup> (It is perhaps important to recall that Jan van der Marck, one of Biederman's most persistent defenders, was a director in Chicago involved with 'anti-museums' in the 1960s.)<sup>53</sup> Biederman optimistically claims that the New Art, along with science and technology, heralds a new epoch in which the schism between collective and individualistic can be resolved. Constructionist work, 'a classless art', will help engender a higher level of consciousness leading beyond issues of nationalism to international unity.<sup>54</sup>

The monumentality of Biederman's undertaking, if not the magnitude of his achievement, has impressed some scholars and artists. Since Biederman never finished high school, his immense effort to master so much knowledge in so many fields deserves admiration. Nonetheless, the content of *Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge* inspires less esteem. The same can be said of his two other books, both of which are short variations of this first work. Biederman's study must be one of the most sustained examples in art history of the teleological fallacy – the assumption of a final end toward which all art is consciously striving. Had he considered art to be an expression of the

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49 Biederman 1948, pp. 380–81.

50 Biederman 1948, p. 393.

51 Biederman 1951, p. 30.

52 Biederman 1948, p. 611.

53 See Harold Rosenberg's remarks about Jan van der Marck in the essay 'Museum of the New' in Rosenberg 1969, pp. 144–56.

54 Biederman 1948, p. 611.

*meaning* of our sense of sight, rather than a reflection of the *extent* of our sight, he would have been much less dogmatic about art's history. Because, however, he reduces art to a 'realistic' record of nature on various levels – at its best, a superior form of seeing – the perceptual aspect of art unfortunately eclipses art's conceptual dimension. Biederman's failure to avoid the neutral style fallacy – the belief in a style of zero degree subjectivity – leads him to assess other art on the basis of an 'objective' standard contradicted by his own emphasis on the subjective dimension of perception in art. Furthermore, ideas peculiar to various periods, for example, the religious transcendentalism of much Mediaeval art, are dismissed in favour of a presumed neurophysiological scheme of evolution which is highly implausible.<sup>55</sup>

His untenable historical formula leads also to a travesty of the experience of art. Judging art, as he does, on the basis of a triadic division of all history causes him to approach art with blinders. A sensitive perceptual approach to art is ironically denied by a theory of perception which also precludes the consideration of art conceptually. Only in his explication of Constructionism does Biederman betray the insidious simplicity of his method. In this section of his book, Biederman discusses the art in a more expansive, if not exhaustive, context. He explains this art with recourse to several social and philosophical developments, not just by means of his ideas concerning the evolution of vision. His book is most helpful as an apology for his own reliefs, but even then it is restrictive. Fortunately, however, Biederman has come to see this book as flawed *precisely* because it does not even do justice to the experience of his own art.

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55 Recent physiological studies make very clear the untenability of Biederman's neuro-physiological theory of visual evolution. The major assumption of Biederman's formula is that perceptual acts and consciousness are functions of particular parts of the mind and can be independently charted. This overlooks the interdependence of different parts of the mind and the impossibility of knowing them independently. See, for example, Brain 1969, p. 41.

## Marcel Duchamp and the Perceptual Dimension of Conceptual Art

Conceptual Art is often considered to be without a perceptual dimension, even though it is classified with the visual arts.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the critique of formalism advanced by Conceptual Art cannot be totally divorced from perception in favour of ‘pure’ concepts, without eliminating the contextual character of this art. To deny the contextuality of these concepts, however, would be to dismiss the very position without which idea as art is inconceivable when it is also without a perceptual ingress. As will become clear, this paradox has resulted more from the inadequacy of the standard critical response to Conceptual Art, than from the inadequacies of Conceptual Art itself. Just as Merleau-Ponty has noted that in perception there is no vision without thought, so in Conceptual Art there is no concept without precepts.

In addressing the perceptual dimension of Conceptual Art, I will necessarily consider another issue, namely, the relationship of art to aesthetics. Using the word ‘aesthetics’ to mean the experience of sensual form, rather than any science of the beautiful, I will discuss the anxious, but never truncated, relationship of art to aesthetics in Idea Art. Duchamp’s readymades, as well as the ‘dematerialised’ and supposedly ‘objectless’ art of the Conceptual movement have not really sequestered cognition from perception, information from experience, or ideas from objects. To a considerable degree, the opposite has occurred. Although Idea Art has highlighted how we conceive art, it has contributed much to a self-consciousness about how we perceive art. Thus, Conceptual Art has led to a rigorous critique of art and aesthetics. Without eradicating either the aesthetic dimension of art or the contextual grounding of aesthetics, Idea Art has stringently re-examined both.

This essay will disclose the perceptual self-consciousness of artists like Marcel Duchamp and Hans Haacke, who have dealt most subtly with the perception of art when not ‘making’ objects to be perceived. Conversely, we will see

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1 I am grateful to the National Endowment for the Humanities, which provided me with a Summer Seminar Grant to work on this article. Also, I am indebted to Professor Sam Hunter, with whom I discussed some of these ideas when I was a Visiting Fellow at Princeton in the summer of 1980.

how certain Conceptual Artists and their apologists have – by erroneously proclaiming Idea Art free from formal considerations – merely helped entrench untenable preconceptions for perceiving art forms. A refutation of this view will be connected to a rebuttal of the argument that modern art has caused the aesthetic to be cut off from art,<sup>2</sup> since neither of these positions recognises that this relationship has been radically re-assessed, but not completely suppressed.

There are three major phases of Idea Art: 1) proto-Conceptual Art, such as the readymades of Duchamp; 2) Conceptual Art, for example, the ‘pure’ ideas of Joseph Kosuth or Terry Atkinson; and 3) Metaconceptual Art, the works by Hans Haacke and Daniel Buren which have given a radical, self-reflexive turn to Idea Art by focusing on the preconceptual factors presently influencing any experience of Conceptual Art. In recognition of how recent Metaconceptual Art has demonstrated that the most profound Idea Art is incisively self-critical about its own contextual grounding, this essay will entail a phenomenological approach, rather than an empirical description. Hence, I will use an *epoché* concerning the ‘universal’ or ontological nature of art, as well as for the possibility of any ‘essential’ or a-contextual approach to art. A more conclusive look at Idea Art will result from a consideration of the issues which fostered it and the factors which await it in any contemporary constitution of its meanings. As this study will show, Idea Art has expanded self-consciousness about the ‘impure’ contextuality of art precisely because it has not reduced art to the ‘purity’ of ideas.

As Richard Wollheim has noted, concepts are used in the creation of any artwork.<sup>3</sup>

To conceive and create art, rather than something else, presupposes a concept of what art is or presumably should be. Even when the spontaneous and the unintentional are used *in* art, their acceptance *as* art involves a conceptual ordering which elevates some ideas over others. Anything can be considered art, but only if it is intentionally conceivable as art by someone who experiences it as such. Even though the conceptual dimension of art has been emphatically underscored in the twentieth century, it was hardly unemphasised in earlier periods. Nicolas Poussin, a contemporary of Descartes, defined painting as ‘nothing but an idea of incorporeal things’, since he contended that the concept of an artwork was ‘a pure product of the mind’.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, this rationalistic grounding of classicising art was directly related to a concern with

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2 Binkley 1977, p. 265.

3 Wollheim 1974, p. 114.

4 Poussin 1958, pp. 144–5. For a discussion of Descartes’ relationship to Poussin and the Grand Manner, see Lee 1967.

meticulously *finished* objects, along with a concept of beauty as the harmonious cohesion of the sensory and the cognitive. Significantly, modern Idea Art has helped to undermine this Cartesian based classicism by concretely divulging the inconclusiveness of its concept of finish, the inconsequentiality of its concept of beauty. Thus, Idea Art has re-emphasised the conceptual dimension of art, even while simultaneously eliminating past presuppositions for this conceptual basis.

In opposing the supposed anti-intellectualism of post-Courbet 'retinal' painting, as well as the 'monetarisation' whereby all art was being reified into commodity fetishes, Marcel Duchamp attempted to put painting more 'at the service of the mind'.<sup>5</sup> The result was the readymade, namely, art which was not so much made as conceived because it consisted of a new use for an old object. By expanding art conceptually so that its creation – though not necessarily its experience – became much more an act of cognitive intent, Duchamp called into question the conventional notion of art. Nevertheless, Duchamp's readymades did not dissolve art into an absolute relativism, however 'incomplete' his conception of art. Rather, Duchamp's disclosure that anything can, within a certain context, become art shows that anything which is art has become so by means of a particular context. Thus, to understand art presupposes a comprehension of its historical situation, both perceptually and conceptually.

Readymades would appear to be 'pure' concepts, as many have assumed, because nothing is produced in a manual sense. The creation of readymades seems to involve merely the gratuitous appendage of an idea to an object. As such, it is often argued that the perceptual experience of Duchamp's readymades is negligible, if not non-existent, because 'To know the art is to know the idea; and to know an idea is not necessarily to experience a particular sensation'.<sup>6</sup> This interpretation overlooks, however, the subtlety with which Duchamp used the perceptual space in which the readymades were exhibited. Furthermore, this view is based on the implausible assumption that because no new object is shown nothing new is knowable about the space with which the object interacts perceptually. Yet the importance of Duchamp's readymades is connected to the way he used them to assault vigorously the exhibition space wherein the aura of high art was and is bestowed. An atmosphere of sanctimonious and uncritical esteem, the aura is used to oppose critical consideration and cultural demystification. Duchamp himself noted that the aura of art res-

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<sup>5</sup> Tomkins 1965, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Binkley 1977, p. 266.

ults from commodity fetishism, as well as from the cult of 'uniqueness' his readymades were intended to combat. As Duchamp stated: 'In art, and only in art, the original work is sold, and it acquires a sort of aura that way. But with my readymades a replica will do just as well.'<sup>7</sup>

Here, as elsewhere, Duchamp tried to desanctify art, to render it post-auratic, by calling into question the nature of the exhibition ambience, thus of the cultural values it presupposed. In order to combat the sober placement of pictures in a line on the wall, Duchamp not only showed the readymades, he 'therefore either suspended them from a ceiling or nailed them to the floor'.<sup>8</sup> Photographs have been taken which document the singular visual effects resulting from the display of the *Trap* (1917), a coat rack, and the *Hat Rack* (1917). Few works could ever have undermined more effectively, *in a visual sense*, the sedate loftiness of museum space than *Fountain* – a urinal Duchamp sought unsuccessfully to show at the Grand Central Gallery in New York. Furthermore, this submission to the Society of Independent Artists in 1917 was signed 'R. Mutt' in order to connect indirectly the Monetisation of art with the high art exhibition space, since 'R.' for 'Richard' was chosen as a pseudonym by Duchamp because it was slang for money bags.<sup>9</sup> As such, Duchamp subverted the auratic cult of unique objects both by conceiving art as a premade object, thus destroying the 'mystique' of creation, and then by exhibiting these readymades so as to attack conventional notions of perceiving objects. By displaying commonplace objects in uncommon ways, Duchamp inverted the standard relationship of unique artworks uniformly hung. He conceptually elevated objects to the level of art, then he perceptually denied them the dignified placement which would have consummated their new status.

Because Duchamp intended to make art perceptually unsettling, as well as conceptually inconclusive, he subverted the experience of art by reconceiving the space in which art was to be seen. In 1938 Duchamp designed the exhibition hall in the Galerie Beaux-Arts, Paris for the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*. Concerned with hiding the white and by implication 'lofty' ceiling, Duchamp suspended twelve hundred coal bags from the ceiling, some of which occasionally sprinkled coal dust on viewers. The otherwise edifying visit to an art gallery literally became a dirty experience. The visual heaviness of the coal bags gave the exhibition a constrictive, claustrophobic air, which sabotaged the use of art as an uplifting, escapist outlet. In addition, Duchamp illuminated the

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<sup>7</sup> Tomkins 1965, p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> Schwarz 1969, p. 469.

<sup>9</sup> Schwarz 1969, p. 466.



ceiling rather than the paintings, which were so hard to see that Man Ray issued flashlights to spectators. Far from highlighting the art, thus helping to render it 'numinous', the exhibition space negated the works it was displaying.<sup>10</sup> As Marcel Jean has stated, the visual experience was one of 'essential disorientation', further enhanced by a loud speaker which blared forth the German army's parade march.<sup>11</sup> The intent was to discredit high art as a contemplative mode insofar as it fostered escape from the unacceptability of experiences outside the cloistered realm of art.

In 1942 Duchamp attempted something similar when he again restructured the space of an art exhibition. *Sixteen Miles of String* at the Coordinating Council of French Relief Societies in New York featured a mile of string strung around the gallery in order to make seeing paintings on the walls very difficult. To further increase the distractive character of the exhibition on opening night, Duchamp told half a dozen young boys to play sports in the exhibition area while several young girls skipped rope and played hopscotch. When the gallery viewers asked them to go outside, the children merely responded: 'Mr. Duchamp told us we could play here', although Duchamp was nowhere to be found.<sup>12</sup>

Duchamp's attempts to end the cult of objects were probably most successful, however, when he 'made' artworks that were *experienced* without being recognised as art. For this reason, Duchamp spoke with special delight of an exhibition of readymades in which the viewers did not know they were looking at artworks – an achievement which could not have occurred had the readymades been advanced as 'pure' ideas detached from any visual experience. In 1916 at the Bourgeois Gallery, Duchamp 'hung three of them (readymades) from a coat rack in the entrance and nobody noticed them – they thought it was just something someone had forgotten to take out. Which pleased me very much'.<sup>13</sup> Here Duchamp desanctified art by showing readymades which were not seen as auratically apart from ordinary things. *He elicited this post-auratic response because he used the visual experience of indifference, not because he was indifferent to visual experience.* Thus, the readymades were significant more as concrete acts perceptually experienced, than as abstract ideas cognitively registered. Significantly, Duchamp's readymades undermined conventional concepts of art by being unsettling on the one hand and unrecognisable on the other – owing not to the objects per se but to the various ways they were displayed and experienced.

10 Schwarz 1969, pp. 506–7.

11 Jean 1960, pp. 281–282; also, Schwarz 1969, p. 507.

12 Jean 1960, p. 515.

13 Tomkins 1965, p. 40.

Few of Duchamp's works have depended more on perceptual experience than *L.H.O.O.Q.* In one of several statements about this piece, Duchamp gave a matter-of-fact description of this *readymade assisted*: 'This Mona Lisa with a moustache and a goatee is a combination readymade and iconoclastic Dadaism. The original, I mean the original readymade is a cheap chromo 8×5 on which I inscribed at the bottom four letters which pronounced like initials in French, made a very risqué joke on the Giocondo'.<sup>14</sup>

In response to Duchamp's remark, Timothy Binkley has inferred that this description 'tells you what the work of art is; you know the piece without actually having seen it (or a reproduction of it). When you do see the work there are no surprises'.<sup>15</sup> Having posited this constrictive view of *L.H.O.O.Q.*, Binkley then extrapolates that this work supposedly terminated a connection between art – seen here as a disembodied idea – and aesthetics – characterised here as the sensory experience of art. His conclusion is that Duchamp has affected this cleavage 'by creating non-aesthetic art, i.e. art whose meaning is not borne by the appearance of an object'. Consequently, Binkley has argued that the 'appearance of the moustache and goatee are insignificant to the art'. Thus, the 'point of the artwork cannot be ascertained by scrutinising its appearance'.<sup>16</sup>

Although Binkley opposes the view that the meaning of an artwork is necessarily intrinsic to its formal configuration, his critical approach is flawed by a characteristic failing of formalist criticism, namely, what Whitehead termed the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness'. Precisely because he merely relies on an 'objective' statement of the concept, which is hardly different from relying on an empirical description of its form, Binkley hypostatizes *L.H.O.O.Q.* as an idea by cutting this artwork off from the concrete experiences which, in leading to the conception of the work, invested it with a meaning aside from the 'pure' idea of it. Binkley's approach fails to deal with the process whereby Duchamp's concept became form – a process which transformed the concept while leaving it inextricably connected to, though not synonymous with, its form. Nothing demonstrates more the complex interdependence of idea and form in *L.H.O.O.Q.* than Duchamp's own surprise when he realised his concept formally. As Duchamp has noted, the 'idea' of a woman with facial hair is not *experienced*, as expected, when the work is *perceived*. In discussing his 'three-dimensional pun', Duchamp said:

14 d'Harnoncourt and McShine 1973, p. 289.

15 Binkley 1977, p. 266.

16 Binkley 1977, p. 273.

Freud's point of view was to demonstrate the homosexuality of the personality of Leonardo ... The curious thing about the moustache and goatee is that when you look at it the *Mona Lisa* becomes a man. It is not a woman disguised as a man; it is a real man, and that was my discovery, without realising it at the time.<sup>17</sup>

While to contemporary viewers *L.H.O.O.Q.* might seem a cerebral work involving a 'naughty' joke,<sup>18</sup> this work was a sensational scandal in 1920. When a copy of *L.H.O.O.Q.* (sans goatee) appeared in 391, along with Picabia's *Holy Virgin*, a stained page – the two works 'received newspaper comment all over the world'.<sup>19</sup> Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* was notorious because its appearance generated the explosive visual shock sought by the Dadaists. As Walter Benjamin has observed, the Dadaists desired 'a relentless destruction of the aura of their creations', so that their art 'became an instrument of ballistics. It hit the spectator like a bullet'.<sup>20</sup> The emotional impact of Duchamp's version of the *Mona Lisa* resided in the concreteness of its disdain for Western culture, not just in the potency of the concept itself. Furthermore, the format in which *L.H.O.O.Q.* appeared enhanced the negation of the work. Also on the page in 391 with *L.H.O.O.Q.* were the word 'Dada', which was replete with nihilistic connotations, and parts of a poem in typographic and formal disorder. Far from being seen as a 'pure' idea, *L.H.O.O.Q.* was part of a provocative and impure visual context which many people experienced when they looked at a Dadaist work.

By 1920 Dada had already sided with the Spartakus League in the German Revolution of 1919–20 and the movement had led to the founding of such magazines as *Neue Jugend*, *Freie Strasse*, and *Der Blutige Ernst*, all of which proclaimed the bankruptcy of Western culture.<sup>21</sup> Dada was also connected to the emphatic anti-art and anti-literature declarations in Jacques Vaché's *Letters of War* and to the wildly provocative public manifestations of the Dada group. Not surprisingly, when other *avant-garde* artists, like Albert Gleizes, responded to the 'affaire Dada' (shortly after the *L.H.O.O.Q.* scandal), they maintained that 'bourgeois capitalism, is crumbling', that 'Dada, in the last analysis, represents merely the ultimate decomposition'.<sup>22</sup> Orthodox artists like the poet Paul Claudel responded even more pointedly to the seriousness of Dadaist

17 Crehan 1961, pp. 36–8; also Schwarz 1969, p. 477.

18 Binkley 1977, p. 272.

19 Hugnet 1951, p. 176.

20 Benjamin 1968 [1936], pp. 237–8.

21 Foster and Kuenzli 1979, pp. 6–7.

22 Gleizes 1951, pp. 298–303.

humour. In a statement which can be seen as a rejoinder to the sexual innuendo of *L.H.O.O.Q.*, Claudel remarked: 'As for the present movements, not one can lead to a genuine renewal or creation. Neither Dadaism nor surrealism which have only one meaning: pederasty'.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the most elucidating location of Dadaist negativity, however, is to recall Valéry's essay of 1919, 'The Crisis of the Mind'. In discussing the shell-shocked attitude of Europeans following the First World War, Valéry notes that a shudder ran through the marrow of Europe, because for the first time people were faced with the mortality of Western culture as they knew it. Everything simply 'was no longer the same'.<sup>24</sup> There can be no doubt that Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* was a response to this situation, that it was experienced visually and conceptually as a response to this situation, and that its cultural import was connected to the centrality of this experience in post-war Europe. To overlook the sensory immediacy of how *L.H.O.O.Q.* appeared is to trivialise Duchamp's work by 'purifying' it of a very important dimension.

In using readymades to define art as its context, Duchamp undermined any critical approach that would assess his works as concepts knowable aside from the way they are experienced. Most discussions of Duchamp's artworks are self-refuting; they acknowledge a readymade to be its context and then paradoxically disallow this context by proclaiming the readymade a 'pure' idea. Standard views of this work result in an ahistoricism which does not recognise itself, because it evokes history to name what it fails to locate historically. As such, these critical approaches to the readymades are equally un-self-critical about the context of their own constitutive acts. Just as a readymade is largely its context, so criticism always depends on its context. No one understood better the contextually consultative act of viewing art than Duchamp, who continually addressed the auratic encasement of art and who spoke of the conceptual 'incompleteness' of art: 'The creative act is not performed by the artist alone, the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contributions to the creative act'.<sup>25</sup>

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23 Nadeau 1968, p. 238.

24 Valéry 1962, pp. 23–5.

25 Duchamp 1959, pp. 77–8.

## Robert Smithson's 'Liquidating Intellect'

Robert Smithson's selection as the official US representative to the 1982 Venice Biennale confronts us with an ironic situation. From 1968 until his death in 1973, Smithson made earthworks to oppose what he termed the 'cultural confinement' of art by the 'warden-curator'.<sup>1</sup> Yet his work was chosen for the Biennale by two conservative panels composed almost entirely of curators: the Museum Policy Panel and the Museum Special Exhibitions Panel.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Smithson's artwork was selected under the auspices of the International Communication Agency (ICA), which was established by the US government in 1978 to maintain the 'non-political character' of cultural exchange programmes.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, Smithson was emphatic about the fact that: 'Artists are not apolitical ... Their purity is the opiate, the reward they get. While the external value structure is ripping them off, at the same time they are telling them how pure they are'.<sup>4</sup> In 1982, as in the past with other entries, however, Smithson's selection is explicable in ideological terms which dissolve the surface irony of this choice into deeper contradictions this selection was really intended to veil.

Just as the Abstract Expressionists were picked for the Venice Biennale throughout the 1950s to propagandise for aggressive American individualism,<sup>5</sup> or Ben Shahn was selected in 1954 to promote Cold War liberalism,<sup>6</sup> so the choice of Robert Smithson is weighted with political consequences unacknowledged by those who chose him. At the Biennale and elsewhere, Smithson's work has been used to advance several ideological ends on behalf of the US government and multinational corporations, as well as the established artworld. On the international diplomatic level, Smithson's formally expansive and also politically contentious oeuvre signifies the political pluralism purportedly supported by US foreign policy, at a time when the revolutionary left in the Third World, and sectors of the parliamentary left in Europe, are increasingly challenging the established order.

1 Smithson 1996, pp. 154–6. For the origin of the term 'Earthworks,' see Lawrence Alloway 1975, p. 229.

2 Madoff 1982, p. 15.

3 Madoff 1982, p. 13.

4 Smithson 1996, pp. 264–5.

5 See especially: Cockcroft 1974, pp. 39–41; and Guilbaut 1980, pp. 61–78.

6 Pohl 1981, pp. 80–113.

The signification of 'pluralism' has been characteristic of all US shows since the mid-1960s when Post-Painterly, Minimalist, Pop, and Proto-Pop tendencies were part of the 1964 Biennale. In 1980, for example, the US entry was 'Drawings: The Pluralist Decade', a selection of works by 66 different artists (Smithson was one of them) in almost every style accepted in the American artworld. Significantly, this ideology was notably extended by the selection of Smithson, because his status as a dissident artist within the US promotes the concomitant ideology of American tolerance for oppositional viewpoints, even though postwar US foreign policy has been designed systematically to overthrow democratic popular front governments around the world. The Arbenz government in Guatemala (1954), the Bosch government in the Dominican Republic (1965), the Allende government in Chile (1973), and the present Government of National Reconstruction in Nicaragua, are only some of the popular front coalition governments – all representing a much broader political spectrum than currently exists in American politics – which have been faced with devastating economic and military assaults engineered by the US government in collaboration with multinational corporations.<sup>7</sup>

As to how Smithson's art – known for its critique both of commodity fetishism and the restriction of art to a privileged few<sup>8</sup> – could be used to serve the ideological aims of the US abroad, we need only recall that the 1982 Venice Biennale featured a strongly populist orientation against elitist institutions. A major theme of the exhibition was 'contemporary market excesses',<sup>9</sup> with the political locus of many entries being popular front aesthetics. As French

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7 US opposition to democratically representative popular front governments is well documented in various sources, including the US Congressional Records. For a general study of US foreign policy in this regard, see the profusely documented study by Chomsky and Herman 1979. Concerning the US backed overthrow of the Allende government, for example, see *The Select Committee to Study Government Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities of the United States Senate*, 94th Congress, 1st Session, vol. 7, Covert Action, 4–5 December 1975. As to Nicaragua, it is widely known that the Reagan administration is now carrying out a \$19 million covert military operation against the present Government of National Reconstruction in Nicaragua. For an informative discussion of the broad popular democracy there, which features both a mixed economy and a very pluralistic political arena, see Gorostiaga 1982, p. 19.

8 Smithson spoke against commodity fetishism (see, for example, Smithson 1996, p. 265), as did Christo and other environmental artists. For Christo's use of Marx to reject commodity fetishism, see Diamonstein 1979, pp. 93–4. Even mainstream critics have had to admit that Smithson and other earthworks artists developed 'an intense antagonism to the commodity aspect of art', to quote Calvin Tomkins. See Tomkins 1980, p. 283.

9 Linker 1982, pp. 84–5.

critic Jean Clair noted, the art in the Venice Biennale was generally opposed to 'the various tendencies of an official, institutionalised avant-garde supported by a certain number of galleries'.<sup>10</sup> The neo-expressionist paintings from East Germany, for example, represented a strong indictment of consumerism. In addition, the Venice Biennale itself must be understood in the broader context of recent developments in Europe, specifically the impressive cultural policies of the Socialist Government in France since 1981. With an allocation for the arts approaching one percent of the national budget (as compared to that of only 0.0005 percent in the USA), the Socialist Party is advancing the position outlined in its *Projet Socialiste*: 'Culture is not limited to a market for privileged customers'.<sup>11</sup> The new Ministry of Culture has adopted an arts programme long associated with the popular front, which, without repudiating the art of bourgeois society, is intended to make both the production and consumption of art accessible to 'the entire French people'.<sup>12</sup> Equally significant is the fact that Smithson is an American artist associated with state patronage in Europe. One of his major earthwork/land reclamation pieces is *Broken Circle, Spiral Hill*, which, commissioned by the Dutch government, was created from an old sand quarry near Emmen, Holland in 1971. The socially *engagé* aspect of the work was further consummated when the local citizenry voted public funds for the permanent maintenance of the work.

The process whereby the ICA was able to promote US interests in such a context is very revealing. Before deciding on a show for the 1982 Venice Biennale, the ICA sent a cable to the US cultural affairs officer in Italy.<sup>13</sup> The officer then advised the ICA on what sort of cultural representation would be most 'appropriate' for the Biennale. After having been reviewed by the ICA, the response of the cultural affairs officer was submitted to the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) in the form of a suggestion as to possible entries. In this case, NEA sought to save money by using two panels already meeting, the Museum Policy Panel and the Museum Special Exhibitions Panel, whose charge was to select an 'appropriate' show, previously organised, that was also economically feasible. In light of the popular front context of the Biennale, it is hardly surprising that 'Robert Smithson: A Retrospective View' (organised by Robert Hobbs of the Johnson Museum, Cornell University) was chosen from amongst a list of possible shows that included such other candidates as: 'American Life in

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10 Ibid.

11 *Projet Socialiste: Pour La France des Années 80*, Parti Socialiste, Paris, 1980, p. 280.

12 Marmer 1982, p. 120.

13 Madoff 1982, p. 15.

American Prints', 'Ansel Adams: Photographs of the American West', 'Contemporary American Realism Since 1960', and 'American Impressionism'.<sup>14</sup> All of these exhibitions were less compatible with the ideology of pluralism, not to mention the aesthetics of a popular front.

While not created for the Venice Biennale, the Smithson show conveniently met the ideological demands for a US entry. The way in which Smithson's artwork was used to further the narrow and hardly pluralistic foreign policy interests of the USA – all in the name of 'pluralism' – was not the result of any backroom conspiracy. Rather, this use of his work was an outgrowth of the way his art had already been appropriated in the artworld by what Gramsci would call 'hegemonic' ideas.<sup>15</sup> Thus, it is clear how ideological developments in the cultural sphere intersect with those in the realm of foreign policy, because of consonant values which lead to convergences in the right circumstances.

However, the necessarily paradoxical choice of Smithson on behalf of the USA has resulted in a show denied much of the critical acclaim and public acknowledgment upon which the legitimacy of a dominant ideology has to be based. This situation has arisen because of a fundamental contradiction intrinsic to the nature of US demands, which could not be resolved. On the one hand, Smithson was a good choice for the 1982 Biennale on the basis of his leftist reputation for expanding art into the public sphere, thus challenging the values of the American artworld. On the other hand, however, Smithson could only represent the interests of the USA if the critique he made of the American artworld and of late capitalism – in some cases specifically using the criticisms of Marx – were largely ignored.<sup>16</sup> Hence, Smithson's art was 'appropriate' for reasons it was also important to suppress. Yet, when such things as Smithson's assault on commodity fetishism were downplayed, the most compelling justifications for his being considered in the experimental vanguard disappeared. As a result, even mainstream art critics, otherwise sympathetic to US hegemony, were unenthusiastic about the Smithson show in Venice. Their reservations have included the remarks that this Biennale entry merely achieved 'the dubious virtue of the politically safe, the financially feasible';<sup>17</sup> that 'a super-

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14 Ibid.

15 See Craven 1982a, 'Hegemonic Art History', pp. 54–60 (Chapter 19 in this collection).

16 Smithson 1996, p. 264. For one of the few articles, aside from those of Lippard, which has not ignored this aspect of Smithson's art, see Halley 1981.

17 Madoff 1982, p. 15. Neo-conservatives like Hilton Kramer have focused on the irreconcilability of these two positions. However inadequate Kramer's response was otherwise, he was right in noting that Smithson's work is now being supported by 'funds from the very



fluity of the installation pieces that Smithson himself was prone to disown meant that it looked dated and beside the point';<sup>18</sup> that Smithson became in this particular show 'an eccentric and mannerist quasi-Minimalist in his early sculpture and a laboured fantasist in his late drawings';<sup>19</sup> or that the US choice accomplished little more than the 'progressive canonisation of Robert Smithson'.<sup>20</sup>

On another level, the populist interpretation of Smithson's art has made his work, particularly his land reclamation pieces, part of the domestic discourse concerning corporatism and the American economy. This populist view has been carefully constructed by conventional critics, with *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, the book that accompanied 'Robert Smithson: A Retrospective View', being the culminating statement of this position. Robert Hobbs not only organised the Smithson exhibition, he also edited, introduced, and contributed (both an essay and the lengthy catalogue) to *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*. As such, Hobbs provides the framework, or rather critical context, within which the other three fine essays are located. These other contributions to the book, particularly the excellent article by Lucy R. Lippard, 'Breaking Circles: The Politics of Prehistory', implicitly call into question the constricting parameters established by Hobbs.

Nonetheless, because of the general contours of the book – as well as the aforementioned nature of the exhibition – the progressive insights made by Lippard, Coplans, and Alloway give the book itself a pluralistic look. Yet in light of the eclectic framework imposed by Hobbs – a *mélange* of conventional formalism, neo-existentialism, and post-modernist populism – the essays by the other three critics become co-opted as an extension of this eviscerating relativism. The important leftist theoretical basis for much of Smithson's work, as noted by Lippard, becomes a marginal preoccupation for an artist who, in Hobbs's view, 'merely adapted to the status quo and created artistic statements applicable to it'.<sup>21</sup> Smithson's efforts to relocate art in the public sphere, as discussed by Coplans, become merely a more clever way of marketing art by an artist who, in Hobbs's opinion, 'was realistic, he wanted to make and sell art'.<sup>22</sup>

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same art-world establishment that, even today, it is often assumed to have repudiated' (*New York Times*, 19 February 1982).

18 Feaver 1982, p. 95.

19 Levin 1982, p. 98.

20 Linker 1982, p. 85.

21 Hobbs 1981, pp. 22–3.

22 Ibid.

And, of course, Alloway's sensitive empirical description of Smithson's work becomes an example of empiricism in the surface-oriented essay by Hobbs.<sup>23</sup>

According to the populist thesis promoted by Hobbs in *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*, the artist was 'realistic' enough to see that his desire to return art to the public would be most advanced through collaboration with American corporations.<sup>24</sup> Hobbs states, for example, that Smithson's goal was 'to sell big corporations on the need to use art', thus saving them 'vast sums of money' and providing them with 'high visibility as patrons of art'.<sup>25</sup> Yet Hobbs then paradoxically concedes that Smithson's proposals were rejected by corporations, since these works would serve as exposés of the 'corporations' despoliation of the land'<sup>26</sup> – a concession that refutes his own simplistic interpretation of Smithson's intentions.

Since in 1981 alone the private business sector, headed by corporations, accounted for \$3.28 billion of the \$4 billion budgeted for art in the USA,<sup>27</sup> every American artist is now faced with the issue of how corporate patronage effects public access to art. All of this money from the private business community has had the ostensible aim of bringing aesthetic 'enlightenment' to the American populace. But, as Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, and others have made scandalously clear, this corporate patronage is first and foremost an ideological front to give public legitimacy to the exploitative interests of the monopoly capital sector.<sup>28</sup> Or, as David Rockefeller so unabashedly stated in reference to purchasing the cleansing power of 'pure art': 'It can provide a company with extensive publicity and advertising, a brighter public reputation, and an improved corporate image'.<sup>29</sup>

Smithson clearly saw through this system whereby art is used to generate social legitimacy for corporate capitalism. Not only were his artworks supposed

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23 For a discussion of the differences between the 'necessary empirical dialogue' and 'empiricism,' see Thompson 1978, pp. 4–5.

24 Hobbs 1981, pp. 22–3.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Friedman 1982, pp. 12–13. For a critique of corporatist politics in general, see Hearn 1982, pp. 17–22.

28 See, for example, Craven 1981, pp. 5–11.

29 This statement was incorporated into Hans Haacke's work, *On Social Grease* (1975). For well-documented accounts as to why corporations need to hide their activities, see Chomsky and Herman 1979; Barnett and Muller 1980, or the fine documentary film produced by California Newsreel in 1978, *Controlling Interest: The World of the Multinational Corporation*.

to repudiate how 'the museum functions as a bank', these earthworks were also explicitly conceived to contest how formalist modernism helps 'reinforce the Rockefeller economic aesthetic' (to quote Smithson).<sup>30</sup> Precisely because he knew how monopoly capitalism operates in the artworld, Smithson foresaw that the major issue of the 1970s, and we should add the 1980s, would be: 'the investigation of the apparatus the artist is threaded through'.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, Smithson acutely recognised what most American artists, deluded by the myth of private liberation, cannot, namely: 'it would be better to disclose the confinement rather than make illusions of freedom'.<sup>32</sup> For him, as for Haacke and Buren, the problem was not to create 'liberated art', but to disclose how, within the present system, totally free art is hardly possible. Thus, the most emancipatory art is that which explodes the myth of art's autonomy, in order to address the political strictures confronting all contemporary artists – strictures which must be overcome before freer art is possible.

Yet on another level, the conventional interpretation of Smithson's work upheld by Hobbs is aimed at legitimating the very mainstream chronology of formalist modernism upon which the established artworld bases its 'historical' judgments. Although Hobbs admits that Smithson seemed a 'pariah of the art world',<sup>33</sup> he nevertheless concludes that Smithson really just adapted himself to the status quo in the artworld. In keeping with the orthodox view earlier advanced by Barbara Rose in *American Art since 1900*,<sup>34</sup> Hobbs sees Smithson as an ingenuous sculptor who increasingly experimented with intangible form. As such, he worked on a more monumental scale than the minimalists, was more expansive in his rejection of medium purity than were the post-minimalists, and came to be as much an 'aesthetic spokesman for suburbia and the parking lot' as either Pop Artists or the post-modernists like Robert Venturi.<sup>35</sup> Far from being seen as an adversary of the mainstream, Smithson is simply interpreted as one who embraced it in a more protean manner and with greater novelty than anyone else.

Nowhere is the reduction of Smithson's work to another link in the chain of modern art more pronounced than in Hobbs's discussion of his oeuvre. In giving Smithson a formal pedigree based on other artistic trends, Hobbs con-

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30 Smithson 1996, pp. 262–3.

31 Ibid.

32 Smithson 1996, pp. 154–6.

33 Hobbs 1981, pp. 22–3.

34 Ibid.

35 Hobbs 1981, p. 16. For a penetrating criticism of the post-modernist position, see Müller 1979, 'Reflections on Post-Modernism', pp. 55–7.

nects him to almost everything from Abstract Expressionism to conceptual art, as well as the Hudson School.<sup>36</sup> For a career span of only thirteen years, he uses nine different stylistic categories: (1) Presculptural, (2) Transitional biological, (3) Quasi-Minimalist, (4) Cartographic, (5) Dialectical, (6) Conceptual Narrative, (7) Gravitational, (8) Monumental, and (9) Land Reclamatory.<sup>37</sup> These classifications serve not only to connect his work with other mainstream developments, they also function in a very positivistic way to distance Smithson's different tendencies from each other, except insofar as they are rungs on a one-dimensional ladder of morphological types. Yet this narrow schema trivialises both Smithson's intentions and his achievements, especially since Hobbs claims to be explicating Smithson's ideas. As Smithson himself stated, however, his works were conceived to negate the linear notion of history underlying modernism (although not 'modernity' in the sense Habermas has discussed it – the repudiation of 'a false normativity in history ... a neutralised history, which is locked up in the museum of historicism').<sup>38</sup> Smithson denounced the 'linear, mechanistic, Cartesian' concept of history, because 'I think there is a kind of false view of art history, an attempt to set up a lineage. And, I would like to step outside that situation'. Along with rejecting the opiate of supposed autonomy, Smithson noted: 'Things are not things in themselves. They are related to other things ... I would say most Modernism is based on this Kantian myth business'.<sup>39</sup>

In spite of his intrinsically formalist methodology, Hobbs make overtures to extra-formal ideas in a manner in which hard-line formalists do not. His characterisation of Smithson's 'importance' entails a recycling of existentialism. Hobbs argues, for example, that Smithson's art is about 'nonseeing', that it uses 'non-space' and that it shows the 'way people nonperceive'.<sup>40</sup> The appendage of the prefix 'non-' or 'no-' to ordinary words in an effort to conjure up the lurking void of inauthenticity is, of course, a device which was used in the 1940s by existentialist philosophers. Jose Ortega y Gasset, for example, in his essay on Velasquez (1943), stated that the Spanish painter had a profound insight into 'non-existence'.<sup>41</sup> Later in the 1940s and early 1950s, Abstract Expressionists like Willem de Kooning spoke about working in an existential-

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36 Hobbs 1981, pp. 27–9.

37 Hobbs 1981, p. 11.

38 Habermas 1981, p. 5.

39 Smithson 1996, pp. 310–12.

40 Hobbs 1981, pp. 13, 14, 16.

41 Ortega y Gasset 1972, p. 88.

ist ambience and making paintings of 'no-environments'.<sup>42</sup> Smithson ironically adopted this technique for coining neologisms when he titled his *Site/Nonsite* pieces from 1968. What for him was a way of disclosing his own dialectical approach has implausibly become a conceptual mode in its own right for later critics. A couple of years ago, Carter Ratcliff decided that Smithson's art was really 'about nondeath beyond death',<sup>43</sup> while most recently Hobbs has used a litany of 'non-' philosophical ideas in an effort to explain Smithson's work.

The existential approach is a major means whereby Hobbs defuses politically the contemporary urgency of Smithson's work. Repeatedly, Smithson's confrontational response to a concrete social problem is dissolved into a generalised state of disaffection that is deemed unavoidable. This naturalisation process turns the cause of alienation into a sterile abstraction known as 'modern life'. The very real and certainly avoidable social causes of alienation become 'universal' and 'unchangeable'. In almost neo-Heideggerian terms, Hobbs concludes that Smithson's art depended on 'a desperate feeling of alienation that is part of modern man's existence'.<sup>44</sup> Smithson, on the other hand, discussed his own alienation in very different terms. He stated that the contemporary artist 'is alienated from the value of his work', because of the 'social division of art'.<sup>45</sup> This alienation extends to the artworld, because 'Museum shows often neutralise art by taking it out of society – out of circulation – by rendering it "abstract" and "ineffective"'.<sup>46</sup> After having connected alienation to both the social production and the public presentation of art, Smithson further contended: 'That's why I have to go back to the Marxist thing about the division of labour, in other words the production from work'.<sup>47</sup>

Far from being some vague ontological condition – Smithson condemned 'this junkyard, metaphysics'<sup>48</sup> – alienation was clearly identified by him with the way industrial capitalism had fundamentally redefined the nature of work,

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42 de Kooning 1951. As Irving Sandler has discussed him in *The Triumph of American Painting*: 'De Kooning's pictures more than anything else are metaphors for his own and modern man's existential condition ... De Kooning characterized the modern metropolis as a "no-environment." For De Kooning, man in his "no-environment" becomes a "no-figure"'. Sandler 1970, p. 131.

43 Ratcliff 1980, p. 65.

44 Hobbs 1981, p. 25.

45 Smithson 1996, pp. 262–4.

46 Smithson 1996, pp. 262–9.

47 Smithson 1996, pp. 264–5.

48 Ibid.

hence of all human relations.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, not only did Smithson theoretically reject the social division of labour, just as he rejected the social division of art, he also explicitly incorporated this position into the process for making earthworks. The construction of *Spiral Jetty* (1970), for example, involved a direct repudiation of the capitalist mode of production. The divorce of conception from execution within the labour force, as well as the further division of the manual dimensions within labour itself, were specifically ruled out by Smithson. By fostering the conceptual engagement of workers, rather than just using them technically, Smithson clearly rejected the 'scientific management' (Taylorism), which is a cornerstone of monopoly capitalism. As such, he sought a reconciliation between various aspects of work – aspects of work which have been systematically fragmented ever since the period when Adam Smith devoted Chapter 1 of the *Wealth of Nations*, 'Of the Division of Labor', to a discussion of this new social development intrinsic to industrial capitalism.

As John Coplans noted, in his contribution to *Robert Smithson: Sculpture*: 'Smithson never visualised the final design of any work as completely predetermined. The workers who built the *Spiral Jetty* were not just hired hands: they offered their own suggestions as to how the machines and materials could be employed to realise Smithson's plan'.<sup>50</sup> Equally important is the fact that Smithson valued the *disalienated* attitude of workers toward their own production of the earthworks. As Lucy Lippard stated in her essay: 'he thought of the Earthworks as "collaborative" art and loved the idea of workers on the *Spiral Jetty* bringing their families to picnic near the site, transforming it, in fact, into a park'.<sup>51</sup> Here it is extremely important to recall that a basic aim and result of early capitalism was the total divorce of labour from leisure, of work from play. By enforcing such a compartmentalising of various human spheres, the capital sector was able to exert greater social control, while also being able to break up labour, time, etc. into easily commodifiable exchange units.<sup>52</sup> In his art, Smithson challenged these basic ideas of capitalism.

It does not follow from Smithson's artistic production that he was a 'Marxist artist' or that he made 'socialist art'. As others have already noted, there is no

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49 In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx discusses three types of alienation (*Entäusserung*) and estrangement (*Entfremdung*) resulting from the redefinition of labour by capitalism: (1) alienation from the object one produces, (2) self-alienation (or lack of self-realisation), and (3) estrangement from others (owing to divisive social relations, etc.). For an important recent discussion of these issues, see Braverman 1974.

50 Hobbs 1981, p. 52.

51 Hobbs 1981, p. 33.

52 Thompson 1967, pp. 56–97.

such thing as socialism in one artwork, particularly within a capitalist system that no art can escape (the myth of autonomy). None the less, it is possible, as Smithson's work makes clear, to create art significantly at odds with and in tense relation to the dominant values of late capitalism. While it is obviously true that artists work *within* this system, it is not necessary that they work *with* this system. The profundity of Smithson's art resides not only in the way he negated existing concepts of art, but also in the way he penetrated to the most basic social relations upon which these concepts are necessarily based. For this reason, his stringent critique of Duchamp remains very incisive, not just contentious. In light of his own response to the alienated process of making objects in capitalism, Smithson brilliantly noted of the readymade that: 'there is no visible dialectic in Duchamp because he is merely trading on the alienated object'.<sup>53</sup> Hence, the readymade, far from being revolutionary, is in fact extremely regressive, even perhaps fascistic. By profiting from the further mystification of the artist owing to the social division of art, Duchamp helped sanctify alienated products of labour in 'a complete denial of the work process'.<sup>54</sup> To this art, Smithson countered with his own dialectical view of a less elitist, 'more democratic' artwork.<sup>55</sup>

A major example of how Hobbs's interpretation reduces Smithson's art to a linear, nonsynthetic level of meaning is the way he separates the 'dialectical' work (group 5) from the 'land reclamatory' pieces (group 9). Yet all of Smithson's artwork from the late 1960s till 1973 was self-consciously dialectical because of the dense interchange between life and art it intentionally engendered. Furthermore, to use 'dialectical' as a formal type – rather than as a way of arriving at forms – is to misunderstand what 'dialectical' means. Another clear instance of how Hobbs misuses 'dialectical' is when he considers it synonymous with 'antinomian'.<sup>56</sup> Smithson himself made no such mistakes when he spoke of his own dialectical view, not of any intrinsically dialectical forms.

As to land reclamatory pieces, Smithson said that they involved 'a kind of dialectic between the ecologists and the industrialists'.<sup>57</sup> Far from being indicative of how Smithson was indifferent to progressive change, as Hobbs argues on the basis of his unresolvable antinomies, the land reclamatory proposals were intended to synthesise two conflicting positions. This synthesis would

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53 Smithson 1996 [1973], pp. 310–12. His friend Carl André took this criticism of Duchamp from a Marxist viewpoint even further; see André 1975, p. 115.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Hobbs 1981, p. 14.

57 Smithson 1996, p. 262.

reground culture in nature, while reshaping nature in accordance with culture. On the one hand, Smithson contested the position of the 'idealist ecologist', who, with a naive nostalgia for the pre-industrial past, attempts to 'recover a frontier or wilderness that no longer exists'.<sup>58</sup> On the other hand, Smithson wanted to negate the aims of the 'profit desiring miner' who, in allowing industry to manipulate nature solely for profit, did not address what Smithson called a central problem of our time, namely, that 'most artists, even culture itself is [sic] completely separated from nature'.<sup>59</sup> Should artists be unsuccessful in realising this mediating role between the ecologist and the industrialist, Smithson wrote that companies 'will leave pollution and ruin in their wake'.<sup>60</sup>

By giving art a synthetic position between industry and nature, Smithson progressed beyond both the anti-technological primitivism within the avant-garde (from Gauguin through Jean Tinguely) and the technological determinism of the machine aesthetic vanguard (from Léger through Warhol).<sup>61</sup> Smithson's closest theoretical affinity regarding the relationship of culture to nature and industry is with the writings of Marx and Engels. In discussing the dialectics of nature, Engels noted that human beings are different from animals, because humans not only use nature, they master it, with their *modus operandi* being labour itself. Engels further adds:

Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human victory over nature ... Each victory it is true, in the first place brings about the results we expected, but in the second and third places it has quite different, unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first ... Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means rule over nature like a conqueror ...<sup>62</sup>

Smithson certainly endorsed this view – indeed he seems to have had this passage from Engels in mind – when he wrote: 'In the Marxian sense of dialectics, all thought is subject to nature. The old notion of "man conquering nature" has in effect boomeranged'.<sup>63</sup> Thus, both Smithson and Engels emphasised that we do not rule nature from a superior position outside it, but from an interde-

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58 Smithson 1996, p. 263.

59 Smithson 1996, p. 264.

60 Smithson 1996, p. 379.

61 For a fine critique of technological determinism in the avant-garde, see Berger 1992, pp. 119–26.

62 Engels 1984, pp. 363–4.

63 Smithson 1996, pp. 370–1.



pendent position within it. Human progress can be most effectively achieved by understanding how nature and industry are interrelated, with neither having complete ascendancy over the other.

As this essay has now shown, Smithson's work is very important for reasons that established mainstream art critics find necessary to suppress. Only their temporary success in doing so has led to such things as the presentation of Smithson at the 1982 Venice Biennale – a presentation which saw his artwork promoting the ideology of US 'pluralism' abroad, the interests of corporations at home, and the re-entrenchment of mainstream art history within the artworld. While it is always possible to fault artists on the basis of how they contribute to their own appropriation, and Smithson is not exempt from such criticism, we must not forget that the ideological projects of the Biennale show are much at odds with what is most profound about Smithson's art. The aim, then, of all those who wish to avoid the co-option and domestication of Smithson's achievement must be what Habermas has termed a process of reappropriation. When this process of reappropriation has been extended – and it must be grounded in developments outside the artworld – it will consider, amongst other things, how Smithson's earthworks relate to what he saw as the economic entropy of late capitalism, how his art figures in the town versus country conflict, and how it is connected to the historicisation of science. Smithson will then be reclaimed as a revolutionary intellect, which, to quote Brecht, is *now* 'a dynamic, politically speaking, liquidating intellect'.<sup>64</sup>

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64 Brecht 1974, p. 21.

## Richard Serra and the Phenomenology of Perception

During long periods of history, the mode of sense perception changes along with humanity's entire mode of existence ... sense perception is determined not only by nature but also by historical circumstances.

WALTER BENJAMIN



In several studies of unrivalled range and profundity, Merleau-Ponty has discussed how we perceive. By addressing the 'nascent logos' of 'consciousness in the act of learning', Merleau-Ponty has described the frequently ambiguous and never-ending process whereby things arise perceptually, yet he has done so without dissolving perception into mere endless ambiguity.<sup>1</sup> As he has observed, it is easy to establish the relativity of perception, but this does not explain 'that other miracle', namely, *how* – if all is relative – meaning continually comes into existence.<sup>2</sup> In relating how the hitherto meaningless becomes meaningful, Merleau-Ponty has disclosed the restrictiveness of empiricism by contrasting empirical data with the more expansive sensory encounters from which these facts are taken, yet with which they are hardly synonymous. Through a use of phenomenology to arrive at a proto-conceptual but not pre-cognitive presentation of perception, Merleau-Ponty has confronted the ahistorical attribution of complete objectivity to empiricism with the history of how we have variously perceived empirical data within diverse contexts, at different moments.<sup>3</sup>

As such, Merleau-Ponty could go from writing of the unavoidable contextuality of all perception to observing the transformatory effects of changing contexts on perception. A result of this progression in the way we understand sens-

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1 Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 28.

2 Merleau-Ponty 1964a, p. 39.

3 Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. viii.

ory experience has been the supersession of the Cartesian concept of space, as well as empiricist notions of it, by a phenomenological approach: 'Space is no longer what it was in the *Dioptric* ... [with] a geometer looking over it in order to construct it from the outside'.<sup>4</sup> Instead, we now know that space is never just in front of us, but rather invariably all around us, so that the spatiality of a thing and its existence as a thing are not two distinct problems in perception.<sup>5</sup>

When discussing the 'lived body,' Merleau-Ponty referred to it as the matrix of action permitting perceptual ingress, not as any objective thing-in-itself over and beyond the space it occupies perceptually.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, he was able to add that 'there is no inner person' with senses disengaged from his or her context.<sup>7</sup> Ironically, then, the destruction of Cartesian universality has been accompanied by the denial of pure subjectivity, its converse. To perceive one thing is to do so necessarily in relation to other things, as well as in the context both of ourselves and other people. Just as the very act of seeing is socially mediated by the way we are acculturated, so there is no asocial perception (hence, Merleau-Ponty's aphorism, 'history is other people').<sup>8</sup> Far from being either subjective or objective, the perceptual process is, above all, intersubjective, i.e., a dynamic interaction (not a dichotomous relation) of both, neither of which can be known aside from its interconnections to the other.

While confirming the above epigraph by Benjamin, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description of perception also provides a point of departure for discussing Richard Serra's public sculpture – as Rosalind Krauss has noted it would.<sup>9</sup> Through Merleau-Ponty's delineation of perception, then, we can best approach Serra's major accomplishments: his work's deft reaffirmation of the complexity of perceptual encounters, as well as their primacy for art; its orchestrated conspiracy of circumstances calling attention to the necessarily consummative role, intentional or otherwise, of viewers; its insistence on the resolutely contextual, hence also social, nature of seeing; its concern with disclosing *how* artworks are perceived, as opposed to simply *the object* which is seen; its uncommon, and controversial, demonstration – in the 'society of the spectacle,' with its pervasive regulation of spectator passivity<sup>10</sup> –

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4 Merleau-Ponty 1964b, p. 178.

5 Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 148.

6 Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 104.

7 Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. xi.

8 See Warnock 1970, p. 85 ff., for a look at this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's thought. Also, for an enlightening look at how Merleau-Ponty approached language, see Lewis 1970, pp. 9–31.

9 Krauss 1985, pp. 260–74.

10 Debord 1983.

that perception is both active *and* passive, or, to cite Merleau-Ponty, both projective *and* receptive.

In a certain sense, albeit with varying degrees of self-awareness, we approach all contemporary art in the very complex terms Merleau-Ponty has charted. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty himself authored an incisive essay about Cézanne's work (particularly this artist's representation of spatial ambiguity and his rendition of the multi-perspectival experience of perception) as being an intimation of these events from a phenomenological viewpoint.<sup>11</sup> Yet just because we can, and in fact should, take a phenomenological approach to the perception of all art, it hardly follows that all art either gains to the same degree from such an encounter or accommodates to the same extent such a description. This is where Serra's sculpture, like Cézanne's paintings, is exemplary, because of the distinctive way his work accentuates the phenomenological character of perception as a signal concern.<sup>12</sup> At its best, Serra's public sculpture is a rich locus for advanced perceptual engagement and matching formal production – a production whose intertextuality, or inter-image dialogue within the context of art history, has been well discussed by Robert Pincus-Witten.<sup>13</sup>

Before going on to a further consideration of Serra's sculpture within a phenomenological framework, we should be careful to avoid some of the standard misconceptions about this method of inquiry. Aside from the notable exceptions of Rosalind Krauss and Donald Kuspit,<sup>14</sup> art critics have frequently confused phenomenology with phenomenism – the search for 'pure' phenomena (a form of essentialism variously featuring misguided notions of either 'pure' form or 'pure' intentionality)<sup>15</sup> – in spite of Merleau-Ponty's finding that phenomena exist only relationally, that is, interdependently. From the phenomenological view advanced by Merleau-Ponty, formalism (the most notorious species of phenomenism) is a perceptual impossibility, aside from being conceptually implausible, because it presupposes that you can essentially know an object *aside* from the particular way in which you see it, the peculiar context in which you perceive it, the specific cultural mediation by which you have arrived at a concept of art with which to look at it, and so forth.

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11 Merleau-Ponty 1964 [1945], pp. 9–25.

12 For another artist who belongs in this group, see Craven 1980a, pp. 130–5.

13 Pincus-Witten 1977, pp. 13–32.

14 Krauss 1977, pp. 209–40; and Kuspit 1974, pp. 46–54.

15 This mistake can be found in Michael Fried, *Three American Painters* (Fogg Art Museum, 1965).

Similarly, Merleau-Ponty's use of the 'lived body' has been misconstrued to mean an objective entity capable of being portrayed,<sup>16</sup> even though Merleau-Ponty has termed it an intersubjective juncture whereby objects, such as art-works, are perceptually constituted. In a related move, some critics have equated Merleau-Ponty's critique of Cartesian rationalism with the anti-rationalism of Bergson's 'in-tuitionism' or Heidegger's notion of 'pre-understanding', although Merleau-Ponty, whatever his debt to each, was careful to distance himself from both on this issue and others.<sup>17</sup> Lastly, and perhaps most often, little distinction is made by many between the theoretical position of those practising 'phenomenological criticism' (Roman Ingarden and the Geneva School in literature, Robert Klein in the visual arts) – which is predicated on Husserl's 'transcendental' phenomenology of 'pure' cognition – and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of 'impure' perception.<sup>18</sup> Klein, following Husserl, strived to arrive at a 'pure' consciousness of intentionality in modern painting.<sup>19</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, whose critique of Husserl on this issue is emphatic, there is no consciousness in the abstract, but only consciousness of something, in a relationship with many other things, on a variety of levels, both conscious *and* unconscious.<sup>20</sup> It was precisely Merleau-Ponty's discussion of intentionality in the latter terms that moved Jacques Lacan to see Merleau-Ponty as an important precursor of his own work in psychoanalytic thought.<sup>21</sup>

Installed in New York City during 1980, *St. John's Rotary Arc* remains one of Serra's major achievements in site sculpture, along with *Shift*, *Terminal*, *Twain* and, perhaps, *Clara-Clara*. To a marked extent, this work has both adapted to and reacted against, both assented to and dissented from, the site it occupies near the Holland Tunnel. A special characteristic of this particular location, which makes it unusual in Serra's oeuvre, is that it is what post-modernist partisans, 'learning from Las Vegas', have celebrated as an 'autoscape' – that

16 For this error, see Fried 1978, pp. 85–130. In addition, Fried's position is based on an untenable notion of intentionality from a phenomenological viewpoint. Since he goes from correctly noting that intention and intentionality are not the same to assuming incorrectly that they are disconnected, Fried delimits the contextuality of Courbet's art to a facile stylistic evolution that is all but independent of the social context in which it was created.

17 For his differences with Bergson, see Merleau-Ponty 1962, pp. 57–8, 79, 148; for his differences with Heidegger, see Merleau-Ponty 1967, p. 14.

18 See, for example, Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 14.

19 Klein 1979, p. 193.

20 Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 16.

21 Lacan 1977, p. 119.

urban and suburban twilight zone in which public space is subordinated to the dynamic of private transit.<sup>22</sup> The decentred, as well as dislocated, perception resulting from this social construct is, as Venturi has noted approvingly, without any 'sense of orientation in space'.<sup>23</sup> This effect is further heightened spatially by the juggling of directing signs and distracting billboards, whose relationship to each other is both painfully familiar and never entirely clear, with this combined assault on the senses denying a coherent grasp of public space. Thus, any sculpture in a context such as the Rotary at Holland Tunnel must struggle with the 'anti-spatial' sensation it fosters and the 'autoscope' sensibility often unconsciously projected onto the perception of such a sight – a sensibility further over-determined by mass cultural spectacles in other visual spheres.

Unlike many post-modern architects, Serra has not chosen to conform to the autoscope experience, as if acceding to it were a generous act of visual reveling. Instead, he has reconstituted it perceptually so as to engage it critically. Serra has revealingly described the prior context of the site: 'I have always thought of the Rotary as ... a space polluted by exhaust, a scene of incessant change, a hub, a place of rush/glut, a *place of disorientation* [my italics]'.<sup>24</sup> As such, Serra did not design an (essential) object, which he then adjusted to this unwieldy location. Rather, the form of the artwork is the complex relationship, which arose from the dynamic interchange between his perception of this space and his intention to perceptually alter the viewer's concrete experience of this space. Thus, the work was not conceived to express something merely self-referential (a famous person, abstract form, a symbolic gesture, anthropomorphic allusions), nor was it meant simply to enhance or extend the preexisting environment by representing yet another spectacle in visually consumable terms. In refusing to create an object 'apart' with the supposed consequence of 'humanising' this space even as its structural signification is ignored, Serra has orchestrated instead a field of relationships that throw into question not only the autoscope sensibility, but also its connection to prevailing notions of 'humanist' art production.

As Serra himself has said, 'The *Arc* does not represent the context but redefines its content. It mediates a perception of the site'.<sup>25</sup> Hence the work is a nexus of perceptual experience in broader terms, not simply an object to be perceived in a more circumscribed sense. A perception is, of course, not only

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22 Venturi, 1972, p. 49.

23 Venturi 1972, p. 9.

24 Serra 1980, pp. 52–3.

25 Ibid.

further mediated in social and ideological terms, it is conceptually framed as well. In the case of *St. John Rotary Arc*, this process of perceptual focusing is the geometric frame of the car or truck windshield through which the viewer is looking. Declining to make a work that harbours some 'inner' meaning or some 'cryptic' symbolism, Serra engages the private passenger in a more public journey. In so doing, he also advances an important dimension of Minimalism, however much his post-minimalist work is more perceptually reaffirmative and contextually expansive.

As Krauss has noted, the significance of Minimalism does not reside in any purported reduction of artistic form to some 'essential' or 'minimal' core.<sup>26</sup> On the contrary, the achievement of Minimalism results from how these artists have eliminated illusionism and disused personal expressivity so as to relocate meaning within the conventions of public space and spectator experience. In this way, their work – and Serra's even more so – does not delude the viewer (thus excluding the public) into assuming that the artwork has been 'constituted prior to its contact with the space of the world'.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the participatory involvement of the public called for by the reticence of Minimalism and of Serra's work contradicts the viewer passivity reproduced by the garrulous spectacle of the autoscape.

Unwilling to accept autoscape disorientation as a perceptual given, Serra has subtly oriented the space of the Rotary so as to counteract the sensation of spatial dislocation. The components whereby Serra has intervened in this context were derived in part from existing topographical characteristics. The height of the *Arc*, 12 feet, 'takes its measure, or dimension cue, from the height of the tunnel, footbridge, trucks, bases, and ground-floors of surrounding buildings'.<sup>28</sup> As the only sharp vertical accent to the flat space, aside from the few trees in it, the *Arc* generates a tension with the insistent horizontality of the site, even as the work itself at 200 feet, and more horizontal than vertical, repeats this horizontality in a higher key. Thus, the work both acknowledges the random sense of the site yet consistently imparts a tectonic element that discourages the defocused, scattered perception endemic to endlessly sprawling autoscapes. Consequently, 'the horizontal span of the *Arc* establishes a cross-sectional reading of the entire field and redefines the scale of the site'.<sup>29</sup>

By constructing a structure imposing yet unobtrusive, complexly ordered yet easily intelligible, Serra has imparted a new dimension of ordering inter-

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26 Krauss 1974, p. 69.

27 Ibid.

28 Serra 1980, p. 53.

29 Ibid.

change to the space, even as he has neither hidden nor visually denied the multi-directional sensation of the place. As he has noted, 'The shape and placement of the work respond to the direction of the tunnel's serpentine exit road which turns in one direction, then the other'.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, as the curvature of the work further echoes the turn in the Rotary, the exit road veers elliptically in another direction. With its sizable curved length, the *Arc* functions as 'a quadrant of an 800 foot circle',<sup>31</sup> so that the *Arc* splits through the Rotary while the Rotary cuts through the projected 800-foot circle circumscribed by the outlying highway grid. A concrete perceptual experience resulting from the aforementioned configuration is that a driver circling the Rotary first encounters a looming concavity, which then becomes a recessive convexity, only to reappear as a projective concavity, which then retreats from us in the rear-view mirror.

In phenomenological terms, a number of things arise from this perceptual field, as the viewer constitutes it. Serra himself has very aptly related some significant aspects of this visual interchange:

Coming out of the confinement of the Holland Tunnel, there is an abrupt transition, which causes momentary dislocation and disorientation. The driver's attention is focused on the task at hand, a series of fast decisions. Attention, by necessity, excludes past and future. The immediacy of what is directly in front, at close distance, demands full concentration. The elliptical loop of the Rotary is designed to slow down the tunnel traffic in order to stabilize and refocus attention. As the driver enters into this loop the *Arc* appears in the field of vision. The shape, material and wall-like character of the *Arc* echo the experience of driving through the open canyon of the tunnel exit. The driver's attention is focused forward to the right and to the left, in order to read signs, change lanes and exit uptown or downtown. The *Arc*, seen through the moving frame of the car-window, thus appears and reappears ... From almost every position in the oval, the *Arc* rotates centrifugally outward. This centrifugal reading opposes the driver's centripetal movement ... Driving around the Rotary, both the *Arc*'s convexity and concavity foreshorten, then compress, overlap, and elongate. The abrupt and continuous succession of views is highly transitive, akin to a cinematic experience. The entire field of vision is condensed, concentrated and extended within minutes. A driver's viewing experience

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30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.



of the *Arc* is ordered, controlled, filtered, and limited and is fixed to only one viewing sequence, which is determined by the traffic flow around the Rotary.<sup>32</sup>

By the way in which it takes us back to the still-to-be-reduced plenum of experience, Serra's *Arc* attests to what Merleau-Ponty has called the 'enigma' of space. This enigma consists in the fact that we see each thing in place precisely because things eclipse each other and things compete for our attention precisely because each thing remains in place. Thus, their exteriority is known through envelopment, while their mutual dependency is known through disjuncture.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, we are also reminded of what Merleau-Ponty said of the perceptual field. It is an interdependent 'system' in which an object cannot disclose itself without concealing others in which things continually impinge upon and overlap each other as they advance into and retreat from our focus, in which one perspective does not lead to another but merges into others, in which all perception is perspectival, that is, constantly capable of offering us more to perceive.<sup>34</sup>

Aside from what it reveals about perception in phenomenological terms, *St. John's Rotary Arc* also instructs us that 'learning from Las Vegas' is really a lesson in forgetting how much we could otherwise know. By the way it reaffirms the density of perceptual experience, the *Arc* allows us to understand the attenuated perceptual expectations fostered by the autoscope sensibility and intrinsic to the fetishised vision of a society in which spectacles not only eclipse but also erase most other perceptual interchanges. At its most profound, then, the *Rotary Arc* demonstrates that perception could be another matter, that perceivers could be otherwise, that many barriers to perceptual sensitivity (and social progress) are historically contingent, so that we have a lot to *teach* Las Vegas. Hence, Serra's *Arc* is an excellent pendant to his video *Television Delivers People*, in which he discusses the humanly and perceptually diminishing consequences of the mass culture industry, as well as the system responsible for it. In other words, perception can potentially be experienced in the far more advanced manner that has been described by Merleau-Ponty.

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32 Serra 1980, p. 54.

33 Merleau-Ponty 1964b, p. 180.

34 Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 148.

## Hans Haacke and the Aesthetics of Dependency Theory

Civilization is, above all, the will to live in common. A person is uncivilized to the degree that he or she does not take others into account. Barbarism is the tendency to disassociation ...

JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET



Contrary to what is often assumed, Hans Haacke's artwork is not an example of political art, nor is it to be 'approached solely in political terms'.<sup>1</sup> Rather, Haacke's work is an acute formal affirmation of the unavoidably political nature, however various its manifestations, of *all* art. As such, there is always an unresolved dynamic involving the antiauratic experiences induced by his works and the type of public signification these irreverent encounters register for the viewer. One of the greatest merits of his work is how it has helped advance the debate about art beyond the impossible alternatives of *formalist* art – the myth of noncontingent, acontextual form – and *political* art – the myth of noncontingent, acontextual politics. Far from constituting an artistic monologue, which is the aim that motivates both formalism and Socialist Realism, Haacke's art is the provocative initiation of a multifaceted dialogue that requires public consummation and contestation. The significance of his work is less something to be discovered than something to be constructed: this process is a signal premise of Haacke's work. About the institutional closure on public engagement that is often endemic to the art world in the West, Haacke has noted: 'The limitation of the universe of discourse discourages on so many levels the recognition that this is not the natural state of affairs, that this is not the only world conceivable, that, in fact, it is produced by historical forces'.<sup>2</sup>

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1 These mistaken ideas are promoted by Michael Brenson. See Brenson 1986.

2 Haacke, 1980, p. 9.

The discursive extension of a work through public exchange is usually related to the quality of the questions posed by the artwork. Here again, Haacke's work is profoundly important, since at its best this art not only intimates concrete problems, but also shifts the focus from topical confrontations to structural contradictions. By illuminating particular intersections of art production and political practice, Haacke engages the viewer on a deeper ideological level about the worldview presupposed by these specific conjunctures of formal and political concerns. Thus, Haacke's work links vocabularies of artistic form and the political dimensions they presently represent with a mode of producing aesthetic signification that is intrinsic to the logic of our system of political economy per se. What this ultimately means – in terms that would contravene contemporary art production along with the system to which this production is fundamentally tied – remains, however, dependent on the degree to which the public sphere is qualitatively enlarged. Revealingly, the paradoxical locus of Haacke's work is organically connected to one of the most pressing paradoxes of the world today, both inside and outside the art world: the increasingly tense contradiction between economic democracy and multinational capitalism that is at the centre of almost every conflict in the Third World and in the West. Amongst the most incisive aspects of Haacke's work is how it denies the role of diversionary cultural alibi to a Western art deeply embedded in a paradox, the resolution of which cannot be indefinitely deferred. Whether in favour of democracy in a more advanced form, or capitalism in a more constrictive one, the direction this conflict takes in the future will have crucial consequences for the patronage and production of art, thus further regulating for whom and by whom it is made. Consequently, the broader reception of Haacke's work, which is contingent on majority self-determination both economically and artistically, hangs in the balance between a public sector in need of participatory expansion, and a private sector demanding ever greater exclusivity.

Haacke is one of the most sophisticated artists to have emerged from the New Left and the issues it gave currency to in the late 1960s, as the issues raised by his varied output make clear – from *Rhine-Water Purification Plant* (1972), *MOMA Poll* (1970), and *Social Grease* (1975) to *The Right to Life* (1979) and *MetroMobiltan* (1985). These issues include *autogestion*, or economic democracy in decentralised terms; ecological concerns about the course of Western technological development; a fundamental rethinking of the concept of ideology and of art, drawing on Gramsci, Althusser, and semiotics; a solidarity with self-determination on the part of Third World countries that are still dominated by foreign capital – a situation that has led to the Dependency Theory analysis of André Gunder Frank, Samir Amin, and Fernando Henrique Cardoso; and a cri-

tique of sexual relations that has resulted in modern feminism and gay rights.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, however, aside from some progressive feminists, Haacke is one of the few artists of the New Left to be more, rather than less, prominent since the late 1960s. The Situationists, GRAV, and the Zero Group, as well as the Conceptual Artists and Arte Povera, have all lost much of their vitality and most of their contemporary pertinence, while Haacke has become increasingly significant – even as the ideas of the New Left have become more embattled in the West.<sup>4</sup> In part, the artistic reasons for Haacke's importance reside in his adroit assimilation of the virtues of the New Left while simultaneously excluding many of its serious failings – such as the antisystematic and antitheoretical excesses which culminate in such naive notions as a belief in pure spontaneity.

If one reviews the statements made in the 1960s by progressive artists and art critics, an obvious linkage to Haacke's work is apparent. French critic Michel Ragon summarised the situation in this way: 'In May 1968, many artists adopted an attitude of rejection toward the repressive structure of consumer society ... There was a refusal to collaborate with the existing power structure, a desire to shatter the framework of the art market; even art itself as properly understood was called into question.'<sup>5</sup> Similarly, André Fermigier contended: 'The artist's crime is to emasculate the observer, to impose his own anxiety, his own vision on the world.'<sup>6</sup> Going even further, and in a way reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's undue optimism about the demise of the aura of high art in the 1930s, Gilbert Lascault wrote: 'The primary task of the artist is to destroy, to suppress ... Art production has been desanctified.'<sup>7</sup> And, of course, Herbert Marcuse, one of the most profound thinkers of the period, who also influenced Haacke, spoke of this time in terms of antiart as 'the negation of traditional culture ... the oppressed revoke the Ninth Symphony'.<sup>8</sup>

However, even before the revolution of 1968, the artists in GRAV (*Le Groupe de recherche d'art visuel*) issued a stirring set of General Propositions while Haacke was an art student in Paris from 1960 to 1961. Amongst the things they denounced were: 'the cult of the personality' around artists, 'the dependency of

3 See, for example, Hirsch 1981; and for Dependency Theory: Cardoso and Faleto 1983. Also see: Mattelart 1983.

4 A discussion of Haacke and Zero can be found in: Burnham 1975, pp. 127–30. Yve-Alain Bois connects Haacke to the Situationists in the excellent discussion: Yve-Alain Bois, Douglas Crimp, and Rosalind Krauss 1984, p. 33.

5 Ragon 1969, p. 23.

6 Fermigier 1969, p. 55.

7 Lascault 1969, p. 63.

8 Marcuse 1969, pp. 46–7.

art on the marketplace', and 'all mystification' of artwork.<sup>9</sup> In response to these circumstances they sought 'new means of public contact' through the creation of 'reproducible works'. These works would be based on strategies that 'limit the work to a strictly visual situation', so as to express 'visual instability' and the 'existence of indeterminate phenomena in the structure' of the artwork. At its best, the programme resulted in the work of Julio LeParc, an Argentinian who won the Grand Prix at Venice in 1966 and who was deported from France in May 1968 because of his revolutionary politics.<sup>10</sup> The reliefs of Le Parc, like the work of GRAV in general, intentionally depend compositionally on the angle at which the viewer sees them, in addition to whether or not the viewer is in movement. Spectator motion in front of the work – and this is even more true of reliefs by Jesús Soto of Venezuela – appear to shift, vibrate, and reconstitute on the basis of action by the audience. The design is never entirely stable perceptually, since the viewer seems to initiate a process of transformation with each encounter.

Unfortunately, though, the link was seldom made between *pure* perceptual instability for the spectator and a conception of the structural instability of late capitalism, along with its supposedly static culture. As such, GRAV's artwork did not go from 'spontaneously' stimulating the public formally to collaborating with it conceptually in a sustained way. Good intentions aside, GRAV generally went from spectator engagement to spectacles of entertainment in the increasingly crass, mass-cultural terms of the Op Art it spawned in the mid-1960s. As an expression of the 'society of the spectacle', Op Art featured an emphasis on illusionistic, visual movement, which required the motionlessness of the spectator, thus further consolidating viewer passivity in contradistinction to GRAV's original aims.

Zero, the group formed in Düsseldorf from 1957 to 1963 by Otto Piene, Heinz Mack, and Günther Uecker, held a number of exhibitions in the early 1960s. During this period, Haacke, who was included in some of their shows, enjoyed his first international recognition in the art world. Although less militant than GRAV, Zero was also concerned with visual instability, spectator involvement perceptually, and a sense of formal open-endedness. Like GRAV, Zero never developed a systematic critique of the art and society it was calling into question. Often, the artists of Zero simply used 'radically temporal' process pieces so as to induce a sense of perceptual alteration. Haacke's best work from the mid-1960s is indicative of this general tendency. Works like his *Condensation Cube* (1963–5) continually changed in relation to the gallery temperature, while

9 Burnham 1968, pp. 250–1.

10 On Le Parc's deportation, see: Clay 1968, pp. 62–3.

*Grass Grows* (1967–8) literally did just that inside the exhibition space, even as it never congealed into a collectible art object.

It was in the late 1960s, however, that Haacke, under the influence of biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy's General Systems Theory, made the transition from Neo-Dada ad hocism, Situationist provocations, antiart negations, and pure perceptual engagement to the treatment of art production as part of an expansive system involving everything from natural phenomena to social constructions, including art world ideas and extra-aesthetic ideologies. As such, he progressed beyond the 1960s equation of assaulting art objects with contesting modes of artistic production, the conflation of selling art as a commodity with commodity production per se, and the self-important pretense of exploding the art-world system by simple transgressions against its particular products.

At this time, Haacke confronted the inadequacy of protesting a system by nonsystematic acts. Thus, he absorbed the crucial distinction between an approach that entails *esprit de systématique* (thinking systematically) instead of *esprit de système* (thinking for the sake of a system) – a distinction that was emphasised by d'Alembert and the *Philosophes*.<sup>11</sup> Systematic thinking does not confuse closed signification, or sustained rigour with conclusiveness, nor does systematic thinking preclude the emergence of decentred, contradictory insights. Thinking for the sake of a system, however, involves constructing a monolithic, alternative system to the one being repudiated: an analogy would be the misguided idea of using Socialist Realism to combat 'capitalist formalism'. While the New Left of the 1960s generally opposed the established order without resorting to *esprit de système*, much of the New Left unfortunately did not arrive at an approach based on *esprit systématique*, because it collapsed the opposition to the existing system into an antipathy for systematic thinking as a whole. The consequence was a fragmented and enfeebled position in which one could only hope that different *spontaneous* acts would somehow converge. The rejoinder to a false absolute, then, was a self-defeating relativism.

From the late 1960s until the present, Haacke's somewhat divergent strategy has been characterised – often with paradoxical results – by a systematic scrutiny of the present system that no artist can escape. Hence, his art has become concretely revealing in its focus on particular problems, while being a general challenge to the existing order, owing to the way his art highlights the lack of structural cohesion in the system as a whole. In other words, the art world and the corporate capitalism sustaining it to an ever-increasing degree are shown to be inconsistent in a way that threatens the system itself: the ideology of *pure* art versus the impure uses to which the art is put by

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11 Cassirer 1951, p. 8.

multinationals, the claim that art is simply a natural expression of personal genius versus the artificial process of auratic enshrinement whereby art is made unnatural for the majority of people, the idea that art is on behalf of humanity, even as corporate uses of art veil what is being done to most of humanity, otherwise known as cheap labour. In other words, while the 1960s opposed the system of corporate capitalism as a supposedly undifferentiated whole, Haacke has demonstrated that this system is not a conclusive system because the salutary things done in the West, as in the arts, contravene the logic of the system to which they are uneasily allied.

Although the vocabulary of mainstream modernism has both strong and weak points, far from dismissing it as bourgeois; or ignoring the corporate look (at present it remains an unavoidable part of the landscape); or denying the ubiquity of mass culture (which as Roland Barthes noted is a perverted version of organic popular culture), Haacke uses these forms to disclose their internal contradictions in order to present *the possibility* of their being otherwise. In one of his finest works, *Social Grease* (1975), Haacke adroitly satirises the formal language of corporations, noting that 'neither the spoken nor written word ever appears in a neutral fashion'. Haacke goes on to discuss the ideological dimensions of the artistic form he is neutrally quoting in another context, itself also ideologically charged:

[*Social Grease*] could not be printed on paper and put into frames under glass as I did with the Manet and Seurat pieces [*Manet-PROJEKT*'74 and *Seurat's Les Poseuses, 1888–1975*]. They should not, like those, have the distinguished aura of framed art, but rather have the look of solid objects made of one piece with a certain amount of corporate aggressiveness. I deliberately chose aluminum rather than bronze to give them a contemporary appearance. For the same reason I chose helvetica, the typeface in which many banks print their annual reports. I broke up the text into short lines making a paragraph of each sentence, a device that not only helped legibility but also gave each sentence the ring of a major pronouncement and imitated the technique of public image advertisements. The raised letters and the square format lent the whole an air of solidity and permanence. In short, my aim was to produce commemorative plaques as they might have emanated from the public relations department of a company that wants to project an image of modernity ... Obviously I presented not only the words of the individuals but I also quoted the visual style in which the organizations present themselves to the public.<sup>12</sup>

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12 Haacke 1978, p. 73.

Few if any other works in the postwar period so brilliantly attest to 'the death of the author' (Foucault) in the generation of artistic meaning, even as the work itself features a subtle use by the artist of these institutional determinants. By relocating these remarks contextually, Haacke has presented these statements as the artwork itself because they explicitly discuss the remoulding of art into a better corporate image. The very absence of overt involvement by Haacke divulges another presence – the paradox of 'useless' art being ideologically useful, the contradiction of 'apolitical' art functioning as a sophisticated political tool. Thus, Haacke clearly expresses precisely what Robert Smithson once observed: 'Artists are not apolitical ... their purity is the opiate, the reward they get. While the external value system is ripping them off, at the same time they are telling them how pure they are'.<sup>13</sup>

Not only has Haacke turned the style of Minimalism against itself, as in *The Chase Advantage* (1976), but he has also done the same with fifteenth-century Flemish altarpieces, nineteenth-century history paintings, and twentieth-century Neo-Realism. In regard to his position, Haacke remarked: 'I admit that I have always been sympathetic to so-called minimal art. That does not keep me from criticising its determined aloofness, which, of course, was also one of its greatest strengths'.<sup>14</sup> The contradiction in each case results from the formalist claim that an artistic vocabulary essentially signifies certain things in any context. In addition, the consequent cleavage that occurs in meaning goes against the assumption that a given style does not have the potential to signify contradictory things at the same time.

Haacke has not refrained from overt commentary on the formal language and accompanying ideology he is employing in some works. One recent example of this tendency in his work is *Buhrlesque* (1985), which, as the title suggests, does indeed involve a well-deserved burlesque of the Oerlikon-Buhrle Corporation and its chairman, Dietrich Buhrle. The imagery Haacke uses in this work evokes a visual absurdity that is worthy of Heartfield or Magritte. Buhrle, one of the wealthiest people in Switzerland, is both an important patron of the arts (through such museums as the Kunsthhaus in Zürich), and an equally admiring connoisseur of South African armaments – one of the products his company makes and markets. This prominent pillar of the Swiss art world has broken both United Nations provisions and Swiss law in order to help the South African military. More recently, Buhrle has apparently aided the C.I.A. in securing planes for Reagan's Contras in Nicaragua. In more civilised circles, though,

13 Smithson 1999, pp. 262–9.

14 Bois, et al. 1984, p. 28.



Buhrle is associated with the line of leather goods, particularly dress shoes produced by the Bally Division of Oerlikon-Buhrle.

Haacke's material for the piece is a highly varied mélange: antiaircraft guns along with high-heeled shoes by a staunch supporter of the arts who is also 'sensitive' to the cause of white South Africans. Using a classical figure of Janus in marble relief as a design for the table, on which there is a tablecloth with motifs of cannons and shoes accompanying the corporate logo, and behind which there is a framed photograph of South African troops on parade in Switzerland, Haacke has set the table with two shoes, out of which protrude romantic dinner candles. This is an obvious inter-image reference to Claes Oldenburg's 1968 Yale monument of a giant missile-like tube of lipstick mounted on what resembles a tank's body. As the most outlandish aspect of this work, the collage of shoes and candles extends Magritte's own intentional visual critique of commodity fetishism overdetermined by sexual fetishism, in such paintings as *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1936). Furthermore, Haacke's centrepiece responds to the appropriation of Magritte's imagery in corporate advertisements. Haacke seeks to advance a critique of the very process of fetishisation intrinsic to the commodity production of capitalism. In a certain sense, *Buhrlesque* contrasts with the corporate use of Magritte's vocabulary of images, while it illuminates the structural logic sustaining this appropriation of Magritte's art. In addition, he has commenced a tentative process whereby Magritte's imagery can be disappropriated.

Time and again, Haacke incisively conveys the dependency of much contemporary art on a corporate system that, as Dependency Theorists like Amin or Henrique Cardoso have demonstrated, systematically plunders Africa and Latin America in order to finance, amongst other things, its increasingly powerful hold over the Western art world – a relatively new type of dependency within the West. Few artists other than Haacke make art of such relentless breadth that connects contemporary artistic developments in the West with the continual economic underdevelopment of the Third World. The remarkable range of his art makes most other claims to universality in the arts unjustified by comparison. By revealing this almost bewildering nexus of interdependencies, Haacke reminds us of Robert Smithson's very insightful prediction that the major issue of the 1970s and the 1980s would be: 'the investigation of the apparatus that the artist is threaded through'.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Smithson also contended, as has Haacke in his work, that, 'it would be better to disclose the

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15 Smithson 1996, p. 264.

confinement rather than make illusions of freedom'.<sup>16</sup> The most independent artist is the one who recognises his or her dependency, at least in part, on a system that only partially discloses how it functions and how the meaning of art for that system has become inherently fractured. More than anyone else, Haacke has rigorously explored the process of producing artistic meaning and his discoveries raise pressing questions for the public – a public upon which Haacke's art clearly depends.

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<sup>16</sup> Smithson 1996, p. 265. For an indispensable look at Haacke's recent work see Wallis 1986.

## Norman Lewis as Political Activist and Post-Colonial Artist

Post-colonial literatures [and art] are a result of this interaction between imperial [Western] culture and the complex of indigenous cultural practices ... By the term 'post-colonial' we do not imply an automatic, or seamless and unchanging process of resistance but a series of linkages ... [which are also] critiques of imperial representation, language, and ideological control.

B. ASHCROFT, G. GRIFFITHS, H. TIFFIN



During the early 1950s and early 1960s, when many of the original Abstract Expressionists became involved with the Civil Rights movement as well as Third World independence struggles, Norman Lewis assumed a significant role in the New York art world, a role that would be acknowledged only in the 1980s, after his death.<sup>1</sup> Like many other artists associated with the New York school from the 1940s through the 1960s, Lewis coupled a commitment to political engagement with a concern for internationalist art. It has become increasingly clear that the sophistication with which he intertwined these artistic and social allegiances was an exemplary moment in what is now known as the 'post-colonial' aesthetic that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>2</sup> In according Lewis

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1 In the Fall of 1978, I had the very good fortune to meet Norman Lewis at a loft party in Soho that was given by people from Empire State College. I was introduced to him by an art critic who called Lewis 'one of the best artists in New York'. At the time I knew little about him and his work, but I was immediately struck by his warmth, his dignity, and his calmly reassuring manner. Later, I was quite impressed by the innovativeness and sensitivity of his paintings when, owing to a 1989 retrospective of his works at the Kenkeleba Gallery on the Lower East Side, I finally had the opportunity to see a large cross-section of his whole corpus. For three notable reassessments of Lewis's art since his death in 1979, see Jennings 1989; Craven 1992, pp. 7–45; and Powell 1997, pp. 102–5.

2 For the most comprehensive collection of essays about post-colonial theory, see Ashcroft et

his rightful recognition, he becomes a major force across aesthetic, as well as ethnic lines, rather than simply a minor, or minority, voice within the New York art world. Such a 'revisionist' rethinking of post-war history entails viewing Lewis not merely as a canonical figure, but more important, as a paradigmatic artist of crucial import for cultural politics at the end of the twentieth century and beyond.<sup>3</sup>

Lewis produced highly nuanced 'allover' paintings beginning in 1944, making them some of the earliest of this type in the history of art. ('Allover' is a term used to refer to compositions that have no central focal point and which are animated with relative density and visual weight throughout the entire canvas.) With their diverse debts to African, Asian, and European visual traditions, these works – extending from such paintings as *Metropolitan Crowd* (1946) and *Harlem Courtyard* (1954) through *Klu Klux* (1963) and *Processional* (1964) – attest to an aesthetic that was inextricably linked to his counter-cultural politics, as evidenced by his involvement with such groups as the Artists' Committee for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Two statements from the 1950s provide points of entry for analysing Lewis's varied output in terms of both art and politics. The first was a moving pronouncement by Lewis himself at the Artists' Sessions at Studio 35 on the New York school in 1950. In it he drew an analogy between the artistic practice of Abstract Expressionism and his own activities as a labour

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al. 1992. Among the finest discussions in this impressive volume are those by Chinua Achebe, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, and W.J.T. Mitchell. One of the few notable (and unfortunate) omissions is the exemplary work of Amílcar Cabral, from Guinea and the Cape Verde Islands. At the time of his assassination by Portuguese agents in 1973, Cabral was both a brilliant revolutionary leader in the struggle against Western imperialism in Africa and a theoretician of considerable originality. An excellent example of his early contribution to post-colonial art theory can be found in a public address that he gave at Syracuse University in New York State on 20 February 1970. Entitled 'National Liberation and Culture', this paper was subsequently published in an anthology of Cabral's papers: *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amílcar Cabral*. Africa Information Service (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973). Cabral deserves to be remembered as a figure of historical importance comparable to Frantz Fanon and Patrice Lumumba.

3 I have chosen to use these two terms in a distinctive way. 'Canonical' artists and artworks are the subject of uncritical adulation that renders them largely ineffable and supposedly 'timeless'. Conversely, 'paradigmatic' artists and artworks lead to critical admiration because they are continually timely and in need of historical explication, as well as further debate. Moreover, the latter are by definition signal embodiments of artistic labour and significant sites of ideological convergences.

organiser during the 1930s: 'I remember organising for a union on the waterfront. People then didn't know the function of a union, or what was good about it, but gradually they were made aware of it. The same is true of our relationship with the people; in making them aware of what we are doing [in our art]'.<sup>4</sup> The second statement embodies a view expressed by Ad Reinhardt to fellow artist Rudolf Baranik in the early 1950s. When Baranik, who had recently moved from Paris to New York, asked Reinhardt to name some of the major artists then working in the United States, Reinhardt replied that Norman Lewis was 'one of the best American artists'.<sup>5</sup>

This essay will begin with a summary of Norman Lewis's long-time activism on behalf of social justice and other progressive causes, especially those associated with the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Along the way, the distinctive concept of internationalist abstract art, or 'alternative modernism', that emerged from Lewis's advocacy of profound social change will be examined. Second, there will be a sustained discussion of how Lewis's own transcultural concept of abstraction, with its notable contribution to the art of the New York school, calls for a fundamental re-thinking of the applicability of the so-called 'Modern Man discourse' (a set of ideas that impose European cosmopolitanism as the universal standard for the modern man) to the defining aims of Abstract Expressionism. It will thus be necessary to assess the very way in which Lewis's multicultural 'universalism' (to invoke his own period designation for his artistic practice after the late 1940s) emerged from a triangulated field of views, values, and discourses to constitute an early chapter in what came to be termed a post-colonial aesthetic. In this way, Norman Lewis deftly avoided a common artistic failing of the period, one that the philosopher Cornel West has rightly criticised as a backward-looking 'redemptive culturalism'.<sup>6</sup> Rather, Lewis's work entailed a more visionary, dynamic set of artistic convergences that command our admiration today.

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4 Lewis 1950, p. 16.

5 Rudolf Baranik, interview by the author, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 25 January 1997. For further discussion of Baranik and his own involvement with the Civil Rights movement, see Craven 1996b.

6 West 1993, p. 66.

### Political Activism and Internationalist Art

Norman Lewis often picketed against fascism, militarism, racism, and (against his father's wishes) for the right of dockworkers to unionise.<sup>7</sup> He certainly came by this lifelong involvement with left-wing activism honestly, both as the son of working-class parents who immigrated to the United States from Bermuda and as a young dock labourer himself and union organiser. In his late teens Lewis also served as a sailor (while his father was a longshoreman in Brooklyn). This experience evidently had a formative impact on his attitude toward life, as had been the more well-known case with Frederick Douglass.<sup>8</sup>

Because of their involvement with the cosmopolitan, even emancipatory experience of sailing to foreign ports and encountering alternative cultural traditions, Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, Langston Hughes, and apparently Norman Lewis too, all associated ships and shipping with anti-colonialist, as well as anti-slavery, stances.<sup>9</sup> For numerous African-American leaders who crossed the 'Black Atlantic' (to recall Paul Gilroy's memorable and historically charged term for this body of water), the ship remained 'perhaps the most important conduit of Pan-American communication' until, and later alongside, the modern long-playing gramophone record.<sup>10</sup>

After graduating from New York Vocational High School, where he studied drawing and commercial design, Lewis worked with several organisations that would be deemed 'dangerously left-wing' during the McCarthy era by the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). In the 1930s he studied art at the John Reed Club Art School (while he was also enrolled at Columbia University), joined the Artists Union, and worked for the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

In the 1940s Lewis showed at the leftist Artists' League of America and taught (with Ad Reinhardt) at the alternative Thomas Jefferson School of Social Science. During the insurrectionary 1960s, he worked with popular self-empowerment groups in Harlem, teaching, for example, in the anti-poverty programme Harlem Youth In Action. Subsequently, he helped organise public demonstrations against the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1969 and the Whit-

7 Honig Fine 1973, p. 153. For an extensive chronology of the life of Norman Lewis, see Jones 1989, pp. 58–62.

8 Douglass 1962, p. 119. Also see Gilroy 1993, 13 ff.

9 Gilroy 1993, 13 ff.

10 Ibid.

ney Museum of American Art in 1971, protesting their racially discriminatory curatorial practices.<sup>11</sup>

Lewis played a significant role during a critically important period that reconfigured and democratised modern U.S. history, a period that noted scholar John Hope Franklin has labelled the 'Black Revolution' of the 1960s.<sup>12</sup> Confirmation of Lewis's involvement is in fact found in Federal Bureau of Investigation files from the 1940s through the 1960s – only recently declassified – that were kept on leading artists of the New York school and such organisations as SNCC and CORE, for which Lewis did valuable work. A clandestine twenty-three page document contained within the Bureau's file on Ad Reinhardt (the F.B.I. file on Norman Lewis has still not been released by the U.S. Government) also implicates Lewis in 'subversive' activities that purportedly constituted a threat to 'national security'.<sup>13</sup> Among the organisations designated 'Communist Front Groups' – and thus including members who would be subject to government surveillance – were several to which Norman Lewis (as well as Ad Reinhardt) had belonged.<sup>14</sup>

These utterly legal organisations included the left-wing Artists' League of America, where Lewis showed in 1942; the Thomas Jefferson School of Social Science, where Lewis taught from 1944 to 1949 (Reinhardt was there during the fall of 1946); the Civil Rights Congress (with which Lewis was probably identified); the American Jewish Labour Council, one of the sponsors for the momentous March on Washington on 28 August, 1963, in which both Lewis and Reinhardt (as well as Rudolf Baranik) participated; and the magazine *New Masses*, which Lewis mentions reading in some of his personal correspondence.<sup>15</sup> Intriguingly, it was precisely Dashiell Hammett's association with the Civil Rights Congress that led to the author's imprisonment for six months in 1951 when he refused to name other people associated with this organisation,

11 Jennings 1989, p. 62.

12 Franklin and Moss 1988, p. 443.

13 Federal Bureau of Investigation File on Ad Reinhardt, Archives of the Department of Justice, Washington, D.C., 123 pages total, unpublished. Photocopies of 100 pages of the file are in the personal papers of David Craven, Albuquerque, New Mexico. For a discussion of the file's contents and political implications, see Craven 1993, pp. 41–52; and the more extensive treatment in Craven 1999.

14 Federal Bureau of Investigation File on Ad Reinhardt, 5 January 1955, pp. 1–23. For the Reagan Administration's order allowing this censorship to occur, see Executive Order 10450: Explanation of Exemptions, 4 December 1986 (Washington, D.C.: Department of Justice Publishing Wing, 1986), 1.

15 Ibid. For a list of Lewis's links to the above-mentioned institutions and publications, see Jennings 1989, pp. 58–61.

which would have meant fingering Ad Reinhardt, William Faulkner, and probably Norman Lewis.<sup>16</sup>

Along with many other leading Abstract Expressionists, Lewis served at the forefront of those members in the art world who were committed to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Two of the groups with which the New York school was aligned were the Congress of Racial Equality founded in 1942 by James Farmer, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which was founded in the early 1960s by a group of social activists including H. Rap Brown. These two groups were responsible for initiating the Freedom Rides beginning in 1961, which included groups of Black and White youths who travelled together on buses throughout the South in order to expose the illegal patterns of discrimination for interstate travel that were being upheld by southern state authorities in violation of federal law. The appalling way in which these young activists were hounded, assaulted, and incarcerated by both state law officers and paramilitary, neo-fascist groups did much to focus national attention on the repression in the South and thus helped to break the back of existing segregationism. Among the landmark legislative gains of these courageous Civil Rights workers was the 1965 Voting Rights Act that did so much to expand African-American participation in elections, and thus to further democratise the public electoral sphere in the United States.<sup>17</sup>

According to the official letterhead for SNCC, Norman Lewis (along with Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Ad Reinhardt) was a leading member of the Artists' Committee for Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, which organised a benefit exhibition of works by the New York school and other artists to help finance SNCC's activism. A 1963 SNCC letter of solicitation by Lewis and the above mentioned artists, endorsed by art critics such as Dore Ashton and Elaine de Kooning, reads as follows:

Dear Fellow Artist:

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a national organisation led by young Negro and white men and women, through freedom rides, sit-ins and other forms of nonviolent action, has helped to inspire a dramatic and awesome resurgence in the Negro's drive for complete freedom and equality. We, the initiating artists, have pledged our support and sponsorship to their Southern voter drive, as well as the support of all other artists we are able to contact ... As tangible evidence of our support, we plan an exhibition and sale, to be held in New York City in

<sup>16</sup> Mitgang 1989, pp. 37–42, 89–98.

<sup>17</sup> For a well-known overview of this period, see Franklin and Moss 1988, 443 ff.



November (1st, 2nd, 3rd). We ask artists to become contributing sponsors by contributing paintings, drawings, watercolors, prints, and other graphics. The proceeds of the sale will be used to continue the work of SNCC in its voter registration drive ...<sup>18</sup>

A similar benefit exhibition and sale was organised during the same year by Artists for CORE at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York. Among the accomplished artists who donated works were many prominent Abstract Expressionists, including James Brooks, Philip Guston, Grace Hartigan, Hans Hofmann, Elaine de Kooning, Joan Mitchell, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, and Jack Tworkov. The sponsors of the exhibition also numbered among their ranks distinguished critical advocates of the New York school such as Dore Ashton and Thomas Hess.

A letter of appeal from early 1963 by CORE's national director, James Farmer, stated:

Two years ago, when CORE was organising its first Freedom Rides, it lacked money for bus tickets. An Art Exhibition and Sale at the time provided the necessary funds. The wonderful generosity of the contributing artists helped to make our Freedom Rides possible. The results of those rides, I think, are well known. Bus terminals in more than 120 Southern communities have been integrated. More than that, the courage and restraint of the Freedom Riders, in the face of the most dreadful violence and abuse, gave an immense forward thrust to the whole civil rights movement. It confirmed our faith in the value of nonviolent resistance to segregation. The second Art Exhibition and Sale will greatly assist CORE's steadily expanding program of activism in the north as well as in the south ...<sup>19</sup>

Several striking paintings by Norman Lewis from the early 1960s accent these historical, and indeed historic events, without, however, sacrificing aesthetic nuances or becoming unduly heavy-handed and tendentious. Two of these oil paintings, at once so vivid and evocative, are *Klu Klux* (1963) and *Processional* (1964). The works carried on a type of interimage dialogue with Willem de Kooning's commanding black paintings, such as *Black Friday* and *Light in*

18 Jacob Lawrence, et. al., Letter to 'Fellow Artists' on behalf of the Artists' Committee of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, 1963, in Ad Reinhardt Papers, Archives of American Art, Roll N-69-100: 736-737.

19 Farmer 1963, Ad Reinhardt Papers, Archives of American Art, Roll N-69-100: 687-89.

*August*, both of 1948. The latter canvas had actual links to racial repression in the South through its title's reference to the novel by William Faulkner. And de Kooning himself acknowledged the thematic connection of his paintings to the predicament of the character Joe Christmas, who is a victim of racially motivated murder in Faulkner's novel.<sup>20</sup>

The two paintings by Lewis, executed in a frieze-like format, immediately conjure up a sense of epic struggle in relation to explosive forces. Yet the works are anything but illustrative in their engagement with the horrific acts committed during this era of the Ku Klux Klan and other neo-fascist groups operating in the South. As such, the oil painting *Klu Klux* marshals a compelling use of the anguished formal language of Abstract Expressionism to suggest unsettling effects, raking filaments of light or flames, and harried movements, all by means of ad hoc gestures with deft dashes of paint that both grab our attention and yet force us about visually.

The unique power of *Klu Klux* emanates from its unresolved interplay between the enigmatic and the implied, referring to, but never spelling out, a historical episode. A 'non-protest' painting, it is nevertheless allied with the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Although abstract, it spawns a concrete, even palpable sense of flames at night that signifies both racial violence and resistance to repression. *Klu Klux* is not declarative yet calls for a stand from the spectator. It is an artwork that haunts, but does not harangue, effected by a deeply resonant visual language. It is a painting that challenges spectators without berating them because of the sophisticated demands that it places on its viewers. In short, it is an artwork that evinces remarkable artistic integrity, since it both refuses to forget and yet fails to remind in the forthright terms of a purely illustrative statement that would deny its own aesthetic dimension.

Much the same can be said about the oil painting *Processional*, which was inspired by the momentous 1963 March on Washington, D.C., at which Martin Luther King delivered his world-famous and wonderfully visionary oration 'I Have a Dream'. With its densely filled pictorial field, darting organic movements, flashes of light/dark motifs, and densely crowded but adroitly organised interlacing of figure/ground relationships, this painting both suggests a sense of urgent mass movement and austere refuses to be anecdotal or even slightly illustrative about the topic. A striking sense of historic density is not compromised by being reduced to overly determinate historical events.

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20 For a further discussion of the connection between de Kooning and Faulkner, see Craven 1991, pp. 57–61.

Both of these signal works showcase Lewis's uncommon skill in deploying a nimble, fast-paced, and at times calligraphic line. Lewis was able to unleash this particular formal component with considerable verve and surface animation without sacrificing his other gift for producing soft, ambient passages of colour that are more atmospheric than linear in nature. Taken together, they endow his best paintings with a poetic suggestiveness that provides only oblique hints of figuration, while nevertheless rewarding protracted viewing.

In fact, Lewis specifically addressed his distinctive (some would say paradoxical) linkage of militant political activism with poetic paintings when he embraced popular mobilisation in society while rejecting populist images in art. In a 1969 interview about the 1960s conducted by Elsa Honig Fine, Lewis stated: 'I am not interested in an illustrative statement that merely mirrors some social conditions, but in my work I am looking for something of deeper artistic and philosophic content ... Political and social aspects should not be the primary concern [in art]; esthetic ideas should have preference'.<sup>21</sup> In sum, Lewis was more interested in generating an ideological critique through the actual pictorial logic of his paintings than he was in making explicit political statements through the content of an artwork. In this respect, Lewis was quite close to the other main figures of the first generation of Abstract Expressionism, from Robert Motherwell who painted the series *Spanish Elegies* to the Willem de Kooning who made *Light in August*.<sup>22</sup>

As early as 1946, when he first started producing all over, gestural paintings, such as *Metropolitan Crowd* (1946) continuing through to later works like *Jazz Musician* (1948), Lewis was located in a position of dual engagement, or 'double consciousness' (to recall a key concept of Lewis's friend W.E.B. Du Bois).<sup>23</sup> It involved a commitment to both vanguard politics and avant-garde art that allowed him to link the metropolitan New York art world to the more 'peripheral' Harlem scene with its 'mid-century mood of social separateness and cultural bravado'.<sup>24</sup> The expansive nature of this unlikely linkage is made clear in Lewis's painting *Harlem Courtyard* (1954), with its brittle and pensive mood.

At one and the same time, Lewis wanted a popular audience, while demanding that art – important art – 'go where people haven't been before', as Picasso

21 Norman Lewis, interview in Honig Fine 1973, p. 153.

22 For an in-depth discussion of this issue, see Craven 1999.

23 On this concept of 'double consciousness', see Du Bois 1989, p. 5; and West 1993, p. 61. The fact of Norman Lewis's friendship with W.E.B. Du Bois was conveyed to the author in an interview in New York with Mrs. Ouida Lewis, the artist's widow (July 6, 1991).

24 Powell 1997, p. 103.

(Lewis's 'hero') had done when he 'opened up a lot of people to African art'.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, few artists aside from the Afro-Chinese Cuban painter Wifredo Lam consolidated more convincingly the 'door opened' by Picasso than did Norman Lewis when he executed such African-influenced Abstract Expressionist paintings as *Mumbo Jumbo* (1950). This work transforms his earlier and quite linear delineation of African sculpture into a web of fleeting references emerging from an all-over field that is characterised by an Asian-influenced understatement and an organic, post-Cubist transformational structure. Fully multicultural in its formal confluence of African, Asian, and European-American visual languages, this painting recalls Lewis's cosmopolitan desire to synthesise the aesthetic 'goods' of various maritime ports from around the globe.

Committed as he was to elevating the public discourse about art rather than submitting to dumbing down or hastily levelling artistic practice by pandering to conventional tastes, Lewis did not fit into either of the standard niches created for Black artists from the 1930s through the 1960s. These two positions have been incisively outlined by Cornel West as the quasi-patrician 'New Negro' ambit of Alain Locke, with its essentialising concept of African Art as the affirmation of supposedly 'pure cultural roots'; and the purportedly realistic 'protest art', born of an anti-intellectual populism that ignored the complex nature of any visual language with integrity.<sup>26</sup>

Lewis's well-known impatience after 1940 with populism in the art world, including the 'social realism' that he practised successfully in the 1930s (in such paintings as *Yellow Hat* [1936]), led him to forge an alternative modernism out of what Paul Gilroy has called the 'dislocating counterculture of modernity'.<sup>27</sup> As a fellow traveller of the Communist Party, if not an actual member of it, Lewis was a long-time friend of Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, his Communist sympathies did not cause him to agree with the party line on art. From within an unorthodox interpretation of classical Marxism, Lewis challenged the provincialism, topicality, and narrowness of the Communist Party's official view on art. Another example of Lewis's agile 'double consciousness', this aesthetic position was articulated by Lewis in a personal letter from around 1947, at a time when he had already forged a significant path within Abstract Expressionism:

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25 Ouida Lewis, interview by the author, New York, July 6, 1991.

26 West 1993, pp. 62–6.

27 Gilroy 1993, p. 36. For a discussion of the latter concept, see Craven 1996a, pp. 29–44.

28 Ouida Lewis, interview.

After seriously painting and thinking scientifically I came to certain definite conclusions – which you will find yourself doing, if you approach painting as a true Marxist. Last Thursday the [Communist] Party held a symposium at Manhattan Center – on Art & Propaganda. Joan, Alex, and I bought tickets – then I suddenly decided not to go – I imagined it would be on the same old questions and attitudes with no universal consideration. The following day I met with one of Goodelman's students ... She said the meeting was dull, – This is no more than I expected – now I shall read what the D.W. [*Daily Worker*] or N. Masses [*New Masses*] has to say – Now I am wondering will the *Daily Worker* or the *New Masses* sound like that record – 'Daddy, you were so right' in their praise of Foster on art ...<sup>29</sup>

In 1946 Lewis had expressed his own contrary aesthetic, predicated on, among other ideas, 'an understanding of cultures other than one's own'. Concomitantly, while defending a 'universal' (read 'multicultural' and 'internationalist') art, he warned against 'the limitations which every Negro American' faces under the names 'African Idiom', 'Negro Idiom', or 'Social Painting'.<sup>30</sup> Only through the 'excellence' of an international and profoundly hybrid modernist painting could an artist register the 'most effective blow against stereotypes and the most irrefutable proof of the artificiality of stereotypes in general'.<sup>31</sup>

It was in his 1949 'Application for Guggenheim Fellowship', however, that Lewis best encapsulated his own development:

For many years, I, too, struggled single-mindedly to express social conflict through my painting. However, gradually I came to realise that certain things are true: the development of one's aesthetic abilities suffers by such an emphasis; the content of truly creative work must be inherently aesthetic or the work becomes merely another form of illustration; therefore the goal of the artist must be aesthetic development and, in a universal sense, to make in his own way some contribution to culture ... by persistent curiosity and experimentation, and constant work.<sup>32</sup>

This eloquent and self-critical avowal of a both worldly and wide-eyed abstract art that navigated the spectator beyond the landlocked insularity of mainstream U.S. culture now leads us to a critique of the 'Modern Man' discourse.

29 Lewis 1989 [1947], p. 64.

30 Lewis 1989 [1946], p. 63.

31 Ibid.

32 Lewis 1989 [1949], p. 65.

Because it harbours Eurocentric values, this discourse is clearly inadequate for explaining the non-Eurocentric circumnavigation in art accomplished by Lewis and the Abstract Expressionists.

### Modern Man Discourse vs. the Hybrid Art of Norman Lewis and the New York School

Far from advocating the Eurocentrism underlying the Modern Man discourse, Norman Lewis (and other Abstract Expressionists) produced a noteworthy aesthetic alternative to this mainstream discourse. This countercultural aesthetic of Lewis was less ethnocentric and much more transnational, such as one sees in notable paintings like *Mumbo Jumbo* (1954), where suggestive references to African woodcarving emerge from an organic field of non-figurative elements.

A prominent feature of the cold war period that the New York school had to confront was the myth of Europe's cultural superiority. Concomitant with this idea was a belief in racial inequality that was a tragic hallmark of mainstream culture during the post-war period and on up to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. More specifically, Eurocentrism and its corollary embrace of racial inequality were based on what Samir Amin has called the fallacy of Western 'universalism', which claims simply 'that imitation of the Western model is the only solution to the challenges of our time'.<sup>33</sup>

A major philosophical endorsement along Eurocentric lines and in direct relation to the Modern Man discourse was first provided by Friedrich Nietzsche, who exercised an important influence on post-1945 Western culture. Nietzsche, who admired classical Greek culture as much as he disparaged the eclectic historicism of nineteenth-century Europe, used the Modern Man discourse in a paradoxical manner. At this defining moment in the emergence of the Modern Man discourse, Nietzsche employed it in a self-contradictory way that would later be symptomatic of its mainstream post-war usage. He used it to simultaneously lambast nationalism within European countries and yet also to laud the global prospects of an emergent pan-European culture with purported roots in the soil of ancient Greece.

At once anti-nationalist and unabashedly ethnocentric, Nietzsche's contribution to the Modern Man discourse promoted a contradictory form of Eurocentric 'universalism' that supposedly derived from the 'pure' distillation of Greek culture. Nowhere is the hierarchical and ethnocentric devaluation of

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33 Amin 1988, p. 7.

non-Western cultures as a precondition of the Modern Man discourse more evident than in Nietzsche's celebrated essay from 1876 entitled 'The Use and Abuse of History'. Nietzsche's candid claim for Eurocentrism was expressed as follows:

How could history serve life better than by anchoring the less gifted races and peoples to the homes and customs of their ancestors? ... [Yet] we moderns have nothing of our own. We only become worth notice by filling ourselves to overflowing with foreign customs ... The Roman of the Empire ceased to be a Roman through the contemplation of the world that lay at his feet; he lost himself in the crowd of foreigners that streamed into Rome, and degenerated amid the cosmopolitan carnival of arts, worships and moralities. It is the same with Modern Man.<sup>34</sup>

And how was the Modern Man from the West to gain his bearings in such a situation of disabling heterogeneity? Nietzsche ended his essay with an animated response, a toast to the 'greater moral character' of the Greeks that alone produced 'true culture'. If Modern Man thought himself back to his 'true needs', Nietzsche concluded, 'the Greek idea [of homogeneity], as against the Roman [of hybridity], will be discovered'.<sup>35</sup>

As Dore Ashton and others have shown, Nietzsche's writings often had a discernable impact on members of the New York school, including Norman Lewis.<sup>36</sup> Revealingly, however, only one major figure associated with the school, Clement Greenberg, embraced the Eurocentric 'universalism' propounded by the discourse on Modern Man. Conversely, Lewis as well as the other significant critics and artists of the New York school were fundamentally opposed to any view that granted the superiority of Western culture and European peoples.

In addition, all of the Abstract Expressionists denied the linear concept of historical development upon which the 'West-is-best' thesis depended (as did Greenberg's equally abortive concept of modernism). Nor were any of the Abstract Expressionists proponents of ethnic purity or advocates of a return to pristine roots (this is one of the many positions that distinguishes them from the German Expressionists, for example).<sup>37</sup> All these differences notwithstanding, Greenberg repeatedly insisted that Abstract Expressionism was explicable only by means of a European lineage – which is a view fundamentally at odds

34 Nietzsche 1957, pp. 18, 24, 28–9. Also see Leja 1993, Chapter 4.

35 Leja 1993, p. 72.

36 Ashton 1992, pp. 17, 70, 86, 124, 129, 187.

37 See, for example, Lloyd 1981, pp. 90–112.

both with the avowed artistic intention of the artists themselves and the astute assessments by their best defenders, namely, Dore Ashton, Thomas Hess, Elaine de Kooning, Harold Rosenberg, and Meyer Schapiro.

Along with Lewis's 1946 statement previously cited concerning the multicultural nature of advanced abstract art, there were other writings of considerable significance for the advent of Abstract Expressionism and the New York school. Among these statements were several pieces from 1949 to 1950 by Robert Motherwell, in which the name 'New York school' first originated. In one article, a public talk from 1950 entitled simply 'The New York School', Motherwell made a case for Abstract Expressionism that was clearly in keeping with the parallel articulation of Norman Lewis's countercultural aesthetic position.

[T]he rejection of the lies and falsifications of modern Christian, feudal aristocratic, and bourgeois society, of the property-loving world that the Renaissance expressed, has led us, like many other modern artists, to affinities with the art of other cultures: Egypt and the ancient Mediterranean, Africa, the South Seas, and above all the Orient.<sup>38</sup>

In contrast, in his 1955 piece 'American-Type Painting', Clement Greenberg insisted of the New York school, '[I]t remains that every one of them started from French art and got his instinct for style from it, and it was from the French, too, that they all got their most vivid notion of what major, ambitious art had to *feel* like'.<sup>39</sup> Throughout the McCarthy period, as well as afterward, Greenberg felt he had to thwart the McCarthyists' ethnocentric attacks upon the alien (or non-Western) nature of mainstream modernism by means of repeated assurances of the supposedly pure Western pedigree of modern art, such as that produced by the Abstract Expressionists.<sup>40</sup> Subsequently, Greenberg's triumphalist view of U.S. post-war art gave way increasingly to an all-out defence of Western culture as a whole against multicultural hordes.

Very much like Nietzsche before him, Greenberg used the Modern Man discourse to refer to Greek art (and even Roman culture) as if they were isolated achievements, singular essences. Nonetheless, all serious scholarship, from Rudolf Wittkower through Samir Amin, has shown quite the opposite.<sup>41</sup> In fact,

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38 Motherwell 1992, pp. 77–81.

39 Greenberg 1961, p. 211.

40 Craven 1993–94, pp. 3–10.

41 Wittkower 1989.



both Greek and Roman culture (*pace* Nietzsche and Greenberg) were multicultural from their inception and subsequently multilineal in their influences. As Amin has stated, many 'Western values' are not just Western.<sup>42</sup>

Neither Norman Lewis nor any other major Abstract Expressionist operated, as Greenberg did, with the misguided assumptions of the Modern Man discourse when it came to cultural forms, ethnic identity, or the logic of history. On the one hand, the Eurocentric Modern Man discourse of Nietzsche and Greenberg was about cultural homogeneity, national identity, and ethnic purity. On the other hand, the non-Eurocentric artworks of Abstract Expressionism concerned cultural heterogeneity, polycentric identity, and artistic hybridity, all traits now associated more with post-colonial art than with mainstream modernism. In writing about the achievement of the New York school, Harold Rosenberg introduced the concept of the 'Contemporary Man', which relates more closely to the art produced by Lewis during this period. To distinguish the art of the New York school, like that made by Norman Lewis, from that of European modernism with its basis in the Eurocentric myth of the Modern Man, Rosenberg wrote:

*Modern* modern art – that is, art since the World Wars – arises from the conviction that the forms of Western culture, including its art forms, have permanently collapsed ... The forms of Western art are no longer capable of arousing deep feelings or affecting major experiences ... The *modern* modern poet or painter, as distinguished from the old modern artist, picks his way among the bits and pieces of the cultural heritage ... The fragmentary art of transformal Action painting engages itself within the fragmentary world of contemporary man and the fragmentary outer world in which the cultures of all times and places are blended and destroyed.<sup>43</sup>

The post-1945 theory of Contemporary Man, with its multicultural practices, multilateral sense of time, and multilingual articulation of place, was a salient attribute of Lewis's art in particular and of much Abstract Expressionism in general from the 1940s on. Ironically, when these artists used the term 'modern man', it did not consistently signify for them what it did for mainstream apologists.<sup>44</sup> Actually, the more that Norman Lewis and the Abstract Expression-

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42 Ibid.

43 Rosenberg 1969, pp. 214, 216–17.

44 Leja 1993, Chapter 4.

ists arrived at their mature positions in the mid-1940s, the more they became 'contemporary men' on the issue of Eurocentrism (although no doubt they remained 'modern men' with respect to gender issues).

In keeping with Norman Lewis's commitment to constructing an international abstract language, Barnett Newman wrote, for example, of his own artistic production by saying, 'I'm not interpreting nature or reality – I'm making it'.<sup>45</sup> One telling incident in particular reveals much about the impediments to originating such an internationalist and multicultural language, that is, the intense ethnocentrism and racial discrimination that marked the period in which Norman Lewis, and others in the New York school, started producing post-colonial art. In 1949 Robert Motherwell met (as had Jackson Pollock before him) with Wifredo Lam, who was then a supporter of the Communist movement in Cuba and who was also a member of the French Surrealist group that earlier had been exiled in New York City. Motherwell's disquisition on their meeting is highly instructive:

The conditions under which an artist exists are nearly unbearable; but so they are everywhere in modern times. Sunday last I had lunch in a fisherman's inn in Montauk overlooking Gardiner's bay with Wifredo Lam, the Cuban and Parisian painter, who is half-Chinese, half-Negro; he has difficulty in remaining in this country because of the Oriental quota; I know he is humiliated on occasion in New York, for example, in certain restaurants ... A refrain that ran through his questions is less easy to answer, whether artists were always so 'unwanted'. I replied that artists were more wanted in the past when they spoke for a whole community ... we modern artists constitute a community of sorts ... Lam and I parted advising each other to keep working; it is the only advice one painter ever gives another. Until the structure of modern society is radically altered, these will continue to be the conditions under which modern artists create. No one now creates with joy; on the contrary, with anguish ... In so doing, one discovers who one is, or, *more exactly, invents oneself* (emphasis added). If no one did this, we would scarcely imagine of what a man is capable.<sup>46</sup>

In conclusion, however, mention should be made of some signs of hope for reconstituting the future along more heterogeneous lines. These signs were

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45 Newman 1990, p. 246.

46 Motherwell 1992, p. 68.

glimpsed by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, for example, when he was living in exile in the same New York City of the 1940s that gave rise to the non-Eurocentric 'universalism' of Norman Lewis's work, with their multiple debts to Asian, African, and European American culture. As Lévi-Strauss noted in his later recollection of these years, the essay 'New York in 1941', 'New York was decidedly not the urban-metropolis I had expected, but an immense, horizontal disorder attributable to some spontaneous upheaval'.<sup>47</sup> As such, it was a place that juxtaposed both ancient and recent cultural strata, shards of past ethnic groups with strains of current ones in a glittering mosaic of transcultural creativity that caused its citizens to be anthropological *flâneurs*, as well as practising multiculturalists.<sup>48</sup>

The potential nucleus for what would soon become the transcultural aims and multilateral aesthetics of Norman Lewis and the Abstract Expressionists were already observable in the streets of Manhattan in the 1940s, aside from being on display in the city's Museum of Natural History. Accordingly, Lévi-Strauss wrote of watching Chinese opera being performed under the Brooklyn Bridge, of seeing amazing collections of Eskimo art in the Bronx, and even of unexpected experiences while he was undertaking research in Manhattan: 'New York (and this was the source of its charm and its peculiar fascination) was a city where anything seemed possible. Like the urban fabric, the social and cultural fabric was riddled with holes'.<sup>49</sup>

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47 Lévi-Strauss 1985, pp. 258–67. I am much indebted to the fine discussion of this piece in Clifford 1988, pp. 236–46.

48 Clifford, 1988, p. 238.

49 Lévi-Strauss, 1985, p. 266.

## René Magritte and the Spectre of Commodity Fetishism

Bowler-hatted men in business suits are generally not the stuff of radical critique, even when they serve as diversionary spectacles for the enactment of celluloid crimes.<sup>1</sup> *The Thomas Crown Affair*, a successful adventure film released in the summer of 1999, paraded this point on the big screen and in bold Technicolor no less. Yet René Magritte, whose work is featured in this standard Hollywood detective story, nonetheless insisted that conventionally attired but engaged artists such as himself could, indeed should, mount unconventional critiques of the very same Western culture that would give rise to the Hollywood cinema that now cannibalises Magritte's paintings and photos. In a bracingly defiant and hardly entertaining declaration of artistic aims, Magritte asserted the following in 1938:

The pictorial experience which puts the real world on trial, gives me a belief in the infinity of possibilities as yet unknown to life. I know that I am not alone in affirming that their conquest is the only aim and sole valid reason for the existence of humanity.<sup>2</sup>

Such implacably critical intent was part of Magritte's lifelong commitment to socialism and his long-term mission in art: '*changer la vie*', to recall a well-known cry of the Surrealist movement to which he was allied for several decades, however uneasily at certain moments. Yet what today is left of Magritte's critical project, particularly in light of his cinematic celebrity? Was Magritte's concept of radical artistic engagement merely another striking fiction like

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- 1 This article was developed from a public presentation I gave while I was a Fellow at the Collegium Budapest in Hungary during 1998/99. Among the other Fellows in residence who should be thanked for their critical commentaries on my paper are Horst Bredekamp, Martin Warnke, Franz-Joachim Verspohl, Anna Wessely, Wolfram Hogrebe, and Krisztina Passuth. I should also like to thank the staff at the Georg Lukács Archives in Budapest, where some of the research for this article was done.
  - 2 Magritte 1970, p. 185. This text was given as a lecture at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Antwerp (20 November 1938).

those that fill his well-known artworks – just another figment of this artist's own undeniably fertile imagination?

Such would seem to be the case, if one uncritically ignores the artistic intent motivating his production of images, and simply assents instead to the prevailing public reception and mass cultural function that these images now quaintly serve. But what if, following Walter Benjamin's advice, we rub contemporary history against the grain by using the avowedly critical aims of Magritte's work, so as to re-open the debate about the critical import of his paintings?

In order to answer these questions about Magritte's artistic practice, we must try to explain – not just reinterpret – some of the defining features still embodied in his major paintings (I am thinking here of Pierre Macherey's key directive). In doing such a stringent critique of both the intention and the reception of Magritte's painterly output, we must be ever mindful of the intermittent and unstable gap between an artist's intentionality and his or her artistic realisation. Certainly Magritte was self-critically cognisant of such a gap, as when he remarked, with characteristic irony, towards the end of his career that by his own estimation he had painted over 1,000 paintings, but that he had only produced 100 or so ideas. He then told his art dealer in 1959: 'I think there are enough pictures ... *New pictures are not worth looking at unless they present us with necessary ideas*'.<sup>3</sup> Before explicating, though, what Magritte meant by necessary ideas – that is, ideas explicitly derived from the writings of Marx – and how they were critically responsible for his oeuvre, I shall first survey the primary ways that his paintings are now interpretatively consummated, so as to deploy these readings as a foil for Magritte's own dissenting conception of his artistic practice.

### The Current Reception of Magritte's Paintings

Generally speaking there are three dominant, or hegemonic, interpretations of Magritte's works around the world, particularly in Europe and the United States. First, there is the populist view of Magritte as a charming and innocuous eccentric, whose 'inexplicable' images both hint at arcane autobiographical motifs peculiar to the painter and also operate more broadly as signs for something like a 'pure subjectivity' that sanctions all interpretations equally, no matter how self-absorbed and self-indulgent they might be. As entertain-

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3 Magritte 1997, p. 94.

ing as he is odd, this 'new age' Magritte frequently appears in graphic designs for mass trade magazines and commercial book covers, as well as in certain art history lectures.

Capricious and light-hearted, this dreamy Magritte is unsurprisingly popular because he evidently authorizes solitary lunar voyages for which each and every spectator enjoys a free pass. As such, this Magritte is seen to exercise a type of free-floating free choice, which is innocent of any structural constraints on individual agency and which is oblivious to the broader consequences of its 'freedom' for the rest of humanity, as well as the environment. A Magritte knock-off that appeared in the pages of the *New York Times Magazine* on 26 September 1999 makes this latter point in fine fashion – by reworking Magritte's floating castle in the Pyrenees to be a hovering, hence 'uplifted', image of the Statue of Liberty. His paintings thus signify the type of fetishized individualism so symptomatic of Western, specifically American, culture in which all human rights simply revolve around the supposedly unaccountable freedom to consume – and the right to choose is centred primarily on the right to buy.

Indications of the remarkable popularity of this 'ultra-individual' Magritte, the innocent dreamer, are easy enough to record. In 1992 an exhibition of Magritte's artworks at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City attracted 11,000 visitors a day (which is the record for a modern artist in the 127-year history of this museum), while by comparison the much more widely published and critically acclaimed show of Matisse's works across town during the same period at the Museum of Modern Art ticketed 7,000 people a day. In fact, as Philippe de Montebello, the Director of the Metropolitan, admitted of the Magritte exhibition,

We were surprised by the show's popularity. The irony is that this exhibition had no corporate funding and as late as April [1992] I thought of canceling it, because it was going to be so expensive ... but certainly sales of catalogues and posters and postcards [of Magritte's images] have covered the costs we thought we would have to eat.<sup>4</sup>

Second, there is the Magritte who has become a national symbol of identity for a deeply disunified nation, namely, Belgium. Since Magritte is now interpreted as a signifier of the 'Belgianness of Belgian art', he is celebrated for his

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4 Philippe de Montebello, interview with Carol Vogel in 'The Art Market: Magritte Pays Off', *The New York Times*, 27 November 1992, C18.

affirmative usage of disjuncture, for his imaginary cohesiveness in the face of no real national cohesion. Not surprisingly, then, the 1998 centenary retrospective of Magritte's work (which showcased 300 paintings and gouaches) at the Musée Royal des Beaux-Arts in Brussels was the largest art exhibition ever in the history of Belgium, a nation famous for painters from Jan Van Eyck and Pieter Brueghel through Anthony Van Dyck and Peter Paul Rubens. Several correspondents were struck by the apparent national solidarity manifested in Belgium around the Magritte exhibition on this the hundredth anniversary of the painter's birth. One of them filed the following report for the Sunday Edition of *The New York Times* on 26 April 1998:

This year, at least, Belgians have discovered a rare point of unity in the dapper figure of René Magritte, Belgium's most influential artist this century ... [T]hey have embraced Magritte as the quintessential Belgian, the respectable pipe-smoking bourgeois in the bowler hat whose Surrealistic painting mirrored the obscurity of existence ... Thus Belgians have found that to celebrate his art of the unlikely juxtaposition is to celebrate a nation in contradiction with itself. To accept the artist's refusal to explain his paintings is to be relieved of the need to explain Belgium. Magritte's 'This is not a pipe' has become 'This is not a country', which is fine, because Magritte's nonpipe was also a pipe, just different.<sup>5</sup>

Visual confirmation *à la Magritte* of this nationalist reading appeared in the pages of the London *Financial Times* on 17 January 1999, when one analyst addressed the issue of whether or not Belgium would hold together as a nation, that is, as a unified set of markets for business concerns. (Interestingly enough, this Magritte-derived image of men with apple cores for faces predated the release of *The Thomas Crown Affair*, in which another Magrittesque image, this one of a man with the face of an apple, played a starring role.)

Third, there is yet another Magritte. This is the one who, at about the same time as Fernand Léger in France and Alexander Rodchenko in Russia, designed commercial advertisements in the 1920s and early 30s.<sup>6</sup> Magritte was forced to do so after studying at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Brussels from 1916 to 1918, and then finding it impossible to survive financially as an artist in this period. During 1922/23 he worked in a wallpaper factory – an experience that did leave some notable traces later in his mature oil paintings, such as *Au seuil*

5 Riding 1998, p. AR42.

6 Buckley 1999, p. 1.

*de la liberté* (On the Threshold of Liberty) of 1930. From late 1923 until the mid-1930s, he had no choice but to work as a graphic designer, as well as a commercial draughtsman for *Variétés* fashion magazine, in order to support his own unprofitable career as an artist – that is, as a vanguard artist who gradually worked his way through Cubism, Purism, and then Dadaism, until he became allied with the Surrealists in 1926. At this point he was instrumental in forming a Surrealist cell in Brussels connected to the main contingent of the group based in Paris.

The established view of this redundant but market-savvy Magritte goes as follows:

[He made] posters, fashion publicity, wallpaper designs, invitation cards and advertisements for a variety of commodities. Magritte blithely transforms some of his own icons – the pipe [for example] ... to sell ‘men’s toiletries’. Undertaken for compelling financial reasons, there [nonetheless] seems an undeniable relish on Magritte’s part in producing advertisements for modern objects of desire.<sup>7</sup>

But let us pause here before we reduce Magritte to being simply an isolated dreamer, an emblem of national identity, or a laboratory technician for the culture industry. We need to revisit and re-examine the artist’s own rather divergent positions, in which he claims that his work as a ‘serious’ image-maker in the fine arts was often critically at odds with his activities in the ordinary workplace. In so doing, we should be able to gauge more incisively the adequacy or inadequacy of these above-noted hegemonic interpretations in the public sphere at present. *Did Magritte actually provide us with some telling evidence, some significant clues, concerning what he meant by ‘necessary ideas’ for artistic critique?*

Yes, in fact, he did, especially in two of his signal artistic statements that date from 1938–9. It is particularly instructive to note that they were intended to clarify the nature of his fiercely anti-fascist position when it was all the more urgent to do so in a war-torn Europe. Although overlooked until now in the art historical literature, these clues left us by Magritte are textual traces that lead directly to the work of Karl Marx – specifically Marx’s opening analysis of commodity fetishism in the first volume of *Das Kapital* (1867). For our purposes it is significant to note that Marx personally oversaw the translation of this text into French, and it appeared in his lifetime with a preface that included one of

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7 Ades 1988b, p. 341. Ades review of René Magritte: Catalogue Raisonné is excellent.



Marx's longest disquisitions on his own method of analysis. This French edition was precisely the text that Magritte would read to such profound effect in the mid-1920s.

### The Marxist-Based Artistic Aims of Magritte

One of the two key texts that René Magritte published about his own artistic development was the public lecture that he gave on 20 November 1938 at the Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten te Antwerpen (Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp). Entitled *'La Ligne de vie'*, or 'Lifeline', it was written at an especially pressing historical juncture when the rise of fascism converged with his increasing, if modest, success as a fine artist, all of which in turn permitted him to distance himself both financially and ideologically from the constraints of commercial image-making within the culture industry. Revealingly enough, this statement intimates some crucial things about the pictorial logic propelling his otherwise idiosyncratic and seemingly 'inexplicable' images. Now I quote from Magritte's public lecture:

In 1925, I decided to break with this passive attitude [in painting] as a direct result of an intolerable meditation in a popular café in Brussels: the mouldings of a door seemed to me to be endowed with a mysterious existence, and for a long time I was in touch with their reality. A feeling bordering upon terror was the point of departure for a willed action upon the real, for a transformation of life. Finding the same will, moreover, in the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, but allied to a superior method and doctrine, and making the acquaintance about the same time, of the Surrealists ... I made paintings where the objects were represented with the appearance they have in reality, in a style sufficiently objective so that the subversive effect ... might exist again in the real world from which these objects had been borrowed – by a perfectly natural exchange. In my paintings I showed objects situated where we never find them ... The cracks and creases we see in our houses and our faces I found more eloquent in the sky. Wooden and rounded table-legs lost their innocence, which we normally ascribe to them, as soon as they appeared to be dominating a forest ... The titles of paintings were chosen in such a way as to inspire in the spectator an appropriate mistrust of any mediocre tendency to facile self-assurance ... [In 1936] I then grasped a new and astonishing poetic secret ... [and] I used it to provoke this shock by bringing together objects that were unrelated ... [In sum] pictorial experience

that puts the world on trial, gives me a belief in the infinity of possibilities as yet unknown to life.<sup>8</sup>

Let us now do a brief *explication du texte*, so as to summarise some of Magritte's most symptomatic, if little acknowledged, claims. We shall do so by examining the evidence that he has embedded in the broad daylight of his major statement of artistic intent, much as did the audacious criminal in *The Purloined Letter* (1845) by Edgar Allan Poe. In fact, Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1837) was prominently placed in a painting by Magritte from 1937, namely, *La Reproduction interdite* (Not To Be Reproduced).

First, Magritte makes clear that his work is often about the tactical attribution of human traits or natural forces to manufactured goods – such as tables, door mouldings, and wallpaper – or to industrially processed materials, such as iron or finished wood products. Accordingly, he launched a notable point of departure from a related pre-industrial device of Romantic Period art, namely, the Pathetic Fallacy – as John Ruskin termed it in *Modern Painters*. When practised by painters and poets such as Heinrich Heine and Caspar David Friedrich, the latter conceit involved the attribution of human traits to natural phenomena such as trees, or, as I would like to rephrase it here, to what we now call *raw materials* before they are industrially processed, in contrast to the commodities used by Magritte. Such is the case with the portraits of lonely trees by Friedrich or the poetic description of a tree's melancholy by Heine.

Second, Magritte refers to the 'natural exchange' of objects as the *modus operandi* of his paintings, with the attendant implication that the 'unnatural exchange' of objects in society is among the things that he is visually contesting with his paintings. Natural exchange versus unnatural exchange here signifies what Marx singled out in *Kapital* as the difference between exchanging *use value* (with its basis in the elemental human need for things like foodstuffs or shelter) and trading in *exchange value*, which is produced through commodity fetishism (with its basis in artificial desires determined often by social class, as would be true of, say, cosmetics or luxury products).

Third, Magritte divulged quite tellingly the two basic syntactical moves that often account for what is so striking about his most commanding visual images. In doing so he gives us an unsurpassed key to unlocking the pictorial logic of his paintings. These moves entail the use of condensation and displacement or, to be more precise, the transferral of consumer goods, industrial forces,

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8 Magritte 1970, p. 183.

and human forms to novel and unexpected places. In addition, there is a corresponding fragmentation of forms, as well as the disjointed combination of human body parts and commodity goods. Nor is it by chance here that Magritte's resourceful use of condensation and displacement immediately reminds us of the ideas of another thinker whom Magritte also cited as an influence in his 1938 lecture.

I am referring, of course, to Sigmund Freud and his conception of dream-work, which also structured its images according to condensation and displacement when producing dreams, that is, the disguised fulfilment of repressed wishes, as Freud so famously defined these picture puzzles of the mind in his groundbreaking 1900 book entitled *Die Traumdeutung* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*). Moreover, of particular importance to some of Magritte's encoded paintings was one of the main neuroses diagnosed and defined by Freud in a 1917 paper, namely, *sexual fetishism*, or in this case *foot fetishism*, yet another psychological condition that revolved around displacement, as well as condensation.<sup>9</sup>

Fourth, Magritte discloses that his visual images constitute a pictorial tribunal of sorts, because of the way they interrogate the historically configured field of relationships that provide a strange stage setting for the theatre of commodities in modern life. He did so since he understood well what the early Georg Lukács and then later Walter Benjamin would observe about how commodification had diminished, if not demolished, the borders between the cultural and political, between the economic and the aesthetic, and between personal desire and extra-personal needs.

Like the other members of the Frankfurt School, Benjamin understood that this development meant nothing less than an entanglement of sexual fetishism and commodity fetishism by the forces of Western modernisation, so that a critique of it necessarily called into play a theoretical encounter between the ideas of Freud and Marx – and Magritte in fact showcases this grippingly entangled relationship in some of his paintings reproduced here. To quote Benjamin on this state of affairs, 'the enthronement of the commodity and the glitter of distraction circulating around it' show that 'Fashion prescribed the ritual by which the fetishized commodity wished to be worshipped' in socially prescribed terms.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Benjamin concluded that 'Fetishism, which succumbs to the appeal of the inorganic' is the psychological dynamic propelling the structural logic of a society based on commodity production at the expense

9 Freud 1966, pp. 348–9.

10 Benjamin 1973, pp. 165–6.

of virtually all else. It is necessary to note at this point a key disagreement *within* the Frankfurt School: Benjamin, and later Marcuse, believed that Surrealist images had the power to break the spell of the commodity fetish, while Adorno and Horkheimer rejected this position.<sup>11</sup>

Fifth, Magritte makes clear in the 1938 lecture his concerted aim to criticise 'the cult of commodities' through his own images, by dethroning the commodity through bemused laughter and by debunking the hidden imperatives of the fashion industry through a disclosure of its absurdity. This strategy was based on his equally strong interest in triggering critical, politically engaged reflections among the spectators of his paintings. Moreover, it is particularly revealing here how many times Magritte's paintings focus on the picture frame, or rather the process of framing and being framed by the terms of display.

Here, however, we finally run into a potential snag, since Magritte does tacitly concede that, his own aims notwithstanding, his artworks will meet with success only if his artistic intentions find extension through popular reception. Yet such a popular reception, according to Magritte's view of modern consumer society, is difficult to command because of all the institutional forces standing between the artist and the spectators. Moreover, even such intellectuals as Michel Foucault (who wrote a rather anodyne and largely determinist essay in 1967 about Magritte) have often failed to consolidate the critical intent harboured by Magritte's artworks, thus leaving the public further stranded and at the mercy of the status quo.<sup>12</sup>

### Textual Ties between Marx and Magritte

In order to understand further why Magritte referred to the analysis of capitalism by Marx as possessing a 'superior method', thus as being a model for his own artistic practice, let us now do a textual comparison of some passages in the writings of Magritte with those of Marx. As we shall see, Magritte had in mind some identifiable (although until now overlooked) passages from Marx's *Kapital*, to which he refers directly. These passages from Marx's analysis of capitalism have left indelible traces not only on Magritte's publications, but also and even more importantly on his paintings.

11 Adorno 1974b, pp. 101–5.

12 Foucault 1973. This essay largely depoliticises Magritte's images and ignores their links to Marxism.

Entitled simply *L'Art Bourgeois* ('Bourgeois Art') and published in the *London Bulletin* on 15 March 1939, the tart Marxist-inflected essay by René Magritte was co-authored with Jean Scutenaire, another core member of the Surrealist coterie in Brussels. This urgent piece pointedly discusses commodity fetishism by noting how it mystifies social relations through irrationally privileging *exchange value* over *use value* in the sphere of political economy and beyond. As such, commodity fetishism in the domain of perception dulls one's senses and blunts one's ability to think critically, while also promoting class-based hierarchies in all realms of society. The manifesto-like article by Magritte and Scutenaire goes as follows:

Middle class order is only disorder. Disorder to the point of convulsion, deprived of all contact with the world of necessity. The profiteers of capitalist disorder defend it by a stack of sophisms and lies whose credit they attempt to maintain in all realms of human activity. Doubt is no longer possible. We must denounce this imposture. Our criticism is based not on the desire for combat but on precise and strictly objective observations alone ... The ruse consists essentially in warping the normal relationships between humanity and the real world, so that *it is no longer possible to use the object for itself* but always for motives perfectly foreign to it. *A diamond is not desired for its intrinsic properties – its only authentic qualities – but because, very expensive, it confers upon its owner a kind of superiority over other people and constitutes a concrete expression of social inequality. Moreover, things take on a ridiculous turn when a false diamond is bought unknowingly, since the satisfaction [of ownership] would be the same [my italics].*<sup>13</sup>

Before we establish the textual provenance for this particular linkage of diamonds and exchange value as an ironic insight into the workings of commodity fetishes, let us conclude this section with a look at Magritte's concept of the artist – a concept that flies in the face of the current interpretation of Magritte as a self-absorbed individualist with art to match. This discussion by Magritte from 1939 follows the above-noted verdict against Western society in general:

Things are no different in art. Capitalist hypocrisy, always refusing to take a thing for what it is, lends to art the characteristics of a superior activity

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13 Magritte and Scutenaire 1973, p. 157.

... [T]he middle-class artist claims to EXPRESS elevated sentiments relevant only to him or herself. Here bourgeois individualism is pushed to the extreme so that individualism isolates people from each other and permits each one to consider him or herself to be better than other people with whom they have no actual contact ... The real value of art is a function of its emancipatory revelation. And, nothing confers on the artist any superiority whatsoever in the order of human labor. Artists do not practice the priesthood that bourgeois duplicity tries to attribute to them. Let artists not, however, lose sight of the fact that their efforts are necessary to the dialectical development of the world.<sup>14</sup>

We now need to turn to the passages in Marx that fortified Magritte in his critical assessment of modern society, as well as in his dissident view of the artist. These passages are to be found in Marx's analysis of the proto-surreal social relationships that emerged from the unnatural character of exchange intrinsic to industrial capitalism.

Located in the beginning part of Chapter 1 in the first volume of *Das Kapital*, in a section that is called 'The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret', these extraordinary passages by Marx run as follows:

A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it ... as the product of human labor. It is absolutely clear that, by their activity, people change the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to themselves. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless, the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerged as a commodity, it changes into a thing that transcends sensuousness. It [the table] not only stands with its feet on the ground, but in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. Whence, then, arises the enigmatic character of the product of labor, as soon as it assumes the form of a commodity? ... It is nothing but the definite social relation among people themselves that assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things ... [and] the products of the human brain

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14 Ibid.

appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own ... I call this the fetishism that attaches itself to the products of labor as soon as they are produced as commodities ... [Exchange] Value, therefore ... transforms every product of labor into a social hieroglyph ... The degree to which some [contemporary] economists are misled by the fetishism attached to the world of commodities ... is shown, among other things, by the dull and tedious dispute over the part [supposedly] played by nature in the formation of exchange-value ... *So far [though] no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or in a diamond* [my italics] ... Who would not call to mind at this point the advice given by the good Dogberry to the night-watchman Seacoal [in Shakespeare's comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*]: 'To be a well-favored man is a gift of fortune; but reading and writing comes by nature'.<sup>15</sup>

Before recommencing our analysis along the above-noted lines of Magritte's paintings from the 1930s, we should reflect for a moment upon the chequered, one might almost say 'secret', history of the concept of commodity fetishism within the Marxist tradition after Marx. Little attention was given to this problem by Marxists or indeed anyone else between Marx's discussion in the 1860s and the early 1920s – Magritte, we should recall, addressed this issue in his paintings from the late 1920s onwards. Then, in 1922–3, Georg Lukács, the Hungarian philosopher, wrote a landmark study entitled *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (*History and Class Consciousness*) in which he related commodity fetishism in political economy to the broader social problems of reification and alienation. Enormously controversial in its own day and still debated in our own, this magisterial study inspired the creation of the Frankfurt School, earned the scorn of Western capitalists, and was promptly denounced in 1924 by Grigori Zinoviev, the Bolshevik leader of the Communist International (*Comintern*).

Subsequently, Lukács was moved to repudiate his own book, in order to remain in good standing with Soviet leaders from the 1920s through the 1960s. Among the most sobering experiences I had as a Senior Fellow at the Collegium Budapest: Institute for Advanced Study in Hungary during 1998/99 was when I did research at the Lukács Archive in Budapest and had the opportunity to hold in my hands Lukács's personal copy of *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*. In it, he had made his own pencil notations in the margins in preparation for his 1967 Preface and the 'self-criticism' it included. With a neo-Stalinist

15 Marx 1977, book 1, part 1, section 4, pp. 163–77.

bureaucrat looking over his shoulder, Lukács plotted to denounce his own 'youthful indiscretions' as unacceptably 'subjectivist' and inexcusably 'ultra-left' in a book from the 1920s that many of us refuse to forget.<sup>16</sup>

The ongoing significance of Lukács' book for current critiques of commodity fetishism was recently noted by British art historian Paul Wood, who acknowledged that this study continues to rank among the most stirring and innovative documents of twentieth-century Marxism, whatever its sad fate in the former Eastern bloc countries.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Terry Eagleton has observed that Lukács achieved nothing less than the theoretical revalorisation of subjectivity and self-reflexivity on the left in a way that necessarily stood as a rebuke not only to Western positivism and consumerism, but also to the economic determinism and unblinking orthodoxy of Soviet Marxism. Lukács did so by defining alienation more as a political problem than as an existential predicament, and in the process, he virtually invented the category of reification – which he incisively extrapolated from Marx's theory of commodity fetishism.

As Lukács originally defined it, reification involves the fragmentation and dislocation of modern social experience in a way that causes people to forget that society is a collective process, rather than just an aggregate of solitary individuals. Reification thus encourages people to see things merely in isolation, as disjointed phenomena – or *Ding-an-sich* – outside of any coherent field of structuring relationships with class-based motives. Consequently, for Lukács reification leads not so much to so-called 'false consciousness' (the orthodox view), as to an ideologically mediated form of perception that, mired as it is in the numbing immediacy of seemingly self-evident things, is stunted and superficial in its grasp of things, but not simply wrong. Thus, for Lukács, ideology is both a means of naturalising that which is merely historically contingent and also a form of 'structurally constrained thought' that leads to rudely reductive thinking – and not just an imaginary relationship to actual conditions (as Althusser would later contend in the 1960s when he tried to define ideology merely as 'false *un-consciousness*').<sup>18</sup>

In conclusion, let us contrast Magritte's paintings from the 1930s with some modern advertisements based upon them. It is worth noting that both the

16 Lukács 2002. In 2002, Verso Press published for the first time in English a translation of Lukács's *Tailism and the Dialectic* (*Chvostimus und Dialektik*), which was a secret document written in 1925/26 defending his book *History and Class Consciousness* against Zinoviev's attacks. The manuscript, written in German, remained unknown from 1926 to 1996, when it was rediscovered and published in Hungary by Aron Verlag of Budapest.

17 Wood 1996, pp. 257 ff.

18 Eagleton 1994, pp. 94–104.



images of Magritte and those of modern ads utilise some of the same formal principles, albeit to very different ideological ends. Both either assume or attribute mysterious human-like powers to what are only lifeless, inanimate objects. Both depend for maximum visual effect on a peculiar, even irrational, set of relationships orchestrated by means of a strategic deployment of condensation and displacement. Both present the ordinary as extraordinary, so as to defamiliarise us with the manufactured goods on display and gain our 'instinctive' approval. In the case of the advertisement, though, the aim is a type of glamorous appeal to exaggerate the desirability of the product, whereas in the oil painting by Magritte desire itself is shown to have assumed a strangely reified, even disturbingly distorted, form owing to the way that modern society has truncated the development of desire, then re-shaped it. This ideological mediation and consumerist prefiguration are meant to lead to support by consumers for class-based inequalities.

The modern advertisement simply places commodities on display and shines a radiant, but *pre*-critical light on them, thus inflating their autonomy while conversely reducing them to a brute material function. Contrary to this demotic and trivialising treatment in advertisements, Magritte's paintings accentuate the estranged separateness of the image all the better to put its greatly reduced function on trial in relation to the exaggerated claims made by the culture industry for commodities. Moreover, Magritte starkly illuminated the image's potentially potent role in the expansion and attendant formation of the very senses that will perceive the object in turn. As such, Magritte reminds us of the actively productive role of profound artworks, over and against the largely reproductive function of commercial images within capitalism that subordinate everything to unreflective habits of consumption. About this formative role of art, Marx once observed, the 'forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present'.<sup>19</sup> Marx then added: '*An objet d'art* creates a public with artistic taste and the ability to enjoy beauty – and much the same can be said of other products. Accordingly, production produces not only an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object'.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, one of the traits that gives Magritte's best oil paintings such visual force, thus impeding the effortless and uncritical consumption of them, is precisely how they feature the traces of deliberative human labour responsible for their own formation. For all their seemingly smooth, nonlinear-surface-look and their lean ideogenic logic, Magritte's oil paintings (in person at least if

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19 Marx 1964, pp. 140–1.

20 Marx 1970, p. 133.

not in mechanical reproduction) seldom fail to remind us in smartly sensory terms of manual labour in a pre-Taylorist sense. This origin in a form of artistic production ever more embattled after the ascendancy of corporate capitalism from 1945 onwards contrasts visually with the utterly glossy and often seamless colour photos of the fashion industry. Yet this recent fact of studio life has made it all the more important for feminist artists such as Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Lorna Simpson, and Carrie Mae Weems to use photography in order to mount an internal visual critique of how fashion ‘innocently’ influences its subjects and reproduces a broader public as well. In this sense, their work is carrying on the critical project of Magritte.

Aside from their interdependency with the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism, the paintings by Magritte wonderfully attest to Fredric Jameson’s well-known claim that *‘The Surrealist image was a convulsive effort to split open the commodity forms of the objective universe by striking them against each other with immense force’*.<sup>21</sup> And it is precisely this convulsive shadow-world of unnatural exchange, splintered subjects, and talking commodities that Magritte originally engaged in such a novel and profound way. If, as Oscar Wilde once wrote, ‘a cynic is someone who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing’, then the twentieth century has produced few artists who have been less breezily cynical and more deeply ironic than René Magritte. That fact alone, in an age as vague as ours, helps to explain why Thomas Crown and his admirers are so ill-equipped to make enduring sense of Magritte’s visionary images – images which are often critical, but seldom cynical.

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21 Jameson 1971, pp. 103–5.

**PART 2**  
*Art Critics*





## Ruskin vs. Whistler: The Case against Capitalist Art

Labelled by Kenneth Clark ‘a sad irony’,<sup>1</sup> the position of John Ruskin in the trial with James McNeill Whistler is considered to be more notorious than noteworthy. Robin Ironside’s view which appeared in the March 1975 issue of *Apollo* is indicative of this interpretation: ‘in the light of [Ruskin’s] response to Turner’s final manner, the obscurity of which his own keen eye found to be “dark with excess of light”, his fury over Whistler must be seen again as characteristically inconsistent rather than as furnishing any ground for reproaches against the general quality of his perception’.<sup>2</sup>

Though his appreciation of Ruskin’s art criticism is admirable, Ironside’s essay is incorrect on this matter. It perpetuates the generally accepted idea that in this suit Ruskin was guilty of infidelity to those of his principles that had earlier fostered an understanding of Turner. In fact, as the following article will show, John Ruskin’s position was not ill considered, but quite consistent with his reflections on art and economics. As has been noted by George Landow, a failure to perceive the context of this Victorian writer’s ideas has led critics to charge Ruskin with unmerited inconsistency.<sup>3</sup> The proper setting for Ruskin’s comments will be reconstructed in this essay.

From Ruskin’s criticism in the July 1877 issue of *Fors Clavigera* to the last witness on behalf of the defence in the ensuing trial, Whistler’s paintings were berated for their lack of ‘finish’. The article which prompted Whistler’s suit initiated the charge: ‘I have seen and heard much of cockney impudence before now, but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask 200 guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face’.<sup>4</sup>

In light of Ruskin’s views on art as presented in his other books, this assessment at first appears somewhat capricious. It is ironic that the very point that caused Ruskin to champion Turner seemingly led to his censure of Whistler. Turner’s paintings were, according to the *Literary Gazette* in May 1842, produced ‘as if by throwing handfuls of white, blue, and red at the canvas, and letting that would stick, stick’.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Whistler’s works were described by

1 Clark 1964, p. 206.

2 Ironsides 1975, p. 164.

3 Landow 1971, p. 24.

4 Ruskin 1907, p. 160.

5 Clark 1964, p. 206.

Tom Taylor, a witness for the defence, as being only one step nearer paintings than 'delicately tinted wall paper'.<sup>6</sup> This statement corresponds to the comparison of Turner's works with tinted steam by William Hazlitt, who wrote, '[t]he utter want of a capacity to draw a distinct outline with the force, the depth, the fullness, and precision of this artist's eye for colour, is truly astonishing'.<sup>7</sup> Even as late as 1877, Henry James was to interject in a review which mentioned Turner's *Rain, Steam, and Speed*, 'if that is just the title',<sup>8</sup> thus implying that the painter was describing his technique, rather than the subject depicted.

Edward Burne-Jones, an artist lauded by Ruskin as a future classic and designated by James as the head of the English painters, served as a witness for the defence. While praising Whistler's use of colour and his ability to render atmosphere, he concluded that his paintings were hardly more than beginnings, hence, markedly deficient in finish. Titian's portrait of Doge Andrea Gritti was then shown to Jones who termed it a perfect example of the highest finish of ancient art. Having asserted this, he added that while Whistler was exceedingly talented, he had avoided 'the difficulties of ancient art'.<sup>9</sup>

The choice of this particular painting by Titian, done before his late style was developed, apparently represents a paradox all too evident when Giorgio Vasari, Titian's younger contemporary, is quoted.

It is true that [Titian's] way of working in his last pictures is very different from that of his youth. For his first works were finished with great diligence, and may be viewed from near or far, but the last are worked with great patches of colour, so that they cannot be seen near, while at a great distance they look perfect. This is the reason that many think they are done without any trouble, but this is not true.<sup>10</sup>

During the trial the defence expressed reservations concerning the time Whistler needed to paint a picture – two days in the case of the *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*. Ruskin, however, had earlier written, 'if a great thing can be done at all, it can be done easily ... if a man can compose at all, he can compose at once'.<sup>11</sup> To emphasise his point he noted a masterful drawing by Turner that had been finished in three hours.<sup>12</sup>

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6 Whistler 1971, p. 12.

7 Hazlitt 1933, p. 14.

8 James 1956, p. 123.

9 Whistler 1971, p. 16.

10 Vasari 1971, p. 276.

11 Ruskin 1906, p. 42.

12 Ibid.

Throughout Ruskin's entire 'oeuvre', his position on the matter of finish is far from equivocal. Commencing with volume one of *Modern Painters*, he consistently maintained that unfinished works were frequently superior to finished paintings. He wrote in this, his first major book, that three strokes by Raphael were preferable to a finished picture by Dolci. A completed work was deemed superior to a sketch only when the colour and other means of realisation were employed to amplify the impressiveness of the thought. If, however, the thoughts were diluted by details, the price of this finish would have been too high.<sup>13</sup>

Ruskin favoured an underfinished work to an overfinished one. As a result, Leonardo's landscapes were considered excessively detailed, with their effects verging on the ornamental. Canaletto's works received a far harsher reception, being derisively characterised as coloured Daguerreotypeism. Yet the Yorkshire drawings that he thought of as one of the culminating points in Turner's career were, according to Ruskin, 'little more than exquisite studies in light and shade'.<sup>14</sup> Bernard Berenson drew an analogy a few years later involving Whistler which could have passed for a eulogy of Turner. Labelling the Milanese painter Borgognone a Renaissance Whistler, he noted that the Italian artist had the same passion for tonalities and harmonies as the 'exquisite American'.<sup>15</sup>

Of concern to the defence in the trial was the lack of distinctness in Whistler's nocturnes, especially the one of Battersea Bridge. In volume four of *Modern Painters*, though, Ruskin had made an appeal to nature to defend Turner's paintings from being labelled as indistinct: 'WE NEVER SEE ANYTHING CLEARLY ... What we call seeing a thing clearly, is only seeing enough of it to make out what it is ...'<sup>16</sup>

These statements concerning the nature of finish so consistent with Turner's work and so seemingly antithetical to Pre-Raphaelite paintings necessitate a question concerning Burne-Jones's testimony. While Ruskin favoured the Brotherhood from the start, he did not do so without reservations – one of which concerned finish. On this point Ruskin considered the movement deficient.

The habit of constantly carrying everything up to the utmost point of completion deadens the Pre-Raphaelites in general to the merits of men

13 Ruskin 1865, p. 11.

14 Ruskin 1865, p. 124.

15 Berenson 1952, pp. 84–5.

16 Ruskin 1865, p. 55.

who, with an equal love of truth up to a certain point, yet express themselves habitually with speed ... rather than finish ... this is the most to be regretted because the Pre-Raphaelites ... do not yet themselves know of how much they would be capable, if they sometimes worked on a larger scale, and with a less laborious finish.<sup>17</sup>

The movement from which Burne-Jones derived the basic aspects of his style was, according to Ruskin, least skilful in the matter of finish – the very trait about which this painter testified against Whistler. This fact coupled with the aforementioned passages from Ruskin's works would seem to substantiate the generally accepted opinion, recently restated in Ironside's essay, that he was arbitrary in his position toward Whistler. In fact, however, the reverse is true. Ruskin can be exonerated from the charge of inconsistency by the recognition that he regularly employed in his writings two completely divergent definitions for the word 'finish'. In one sense he used it to refer to the technical finish, that is, the degree of linearity in a painting. Here he found the Pre-Raphaelites at fault, because they were unduly careful with detail. In the other sense, he used it to refer to the conceptual finish, that is, the number of external intellectual associations entailed in a painting. Here he found Whistler deficient.

An incident concerning Henry James illustrates Ruskin's attitude. In viewing the paintings of Winslow Homer, examples of what he called perfect realism, James found them incomplete. Homer had chosen what the urbane expatriate considered the least pictorial and literary elements of civilisation. Regardless of how precisely rendered these pictures were, the result was what James termed a paucity of 'intellectual detail'.<sup>18</sup>

In order for a painting to have had proper finish conceptually both for James and Ruskin, in contradistinction to Whistler who publicly disavowed such aims for his own works, it had to evoke associations with nature and literature. Now the connections envisioned by Ruskin between the works of Turner and those of Burne-Jones are clear. However different they were in seeking technical finish, Turner and Burne-Jones were, in their desire for evocative overtones and literary allusions, as similar to each other as they were dissimilar from Whistler.

In volume three of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin labelled as unintelligible and absurd the assertion that symbolism should not be employed in paintings.<sup>19</sup> Significantly, one of his most extensive analyses of the mythological content

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17 Ruskin 1889, p. 182.

18 James 1956, p. 97.

19 Ruskin 1904, vol. 3, p. 134.



in a painting is of Turner's *The Goddess of Discord Choosing the Apple of Contention in the Garden of the Hesperides*. Ruskin references the *Illiad*, the *Aeneid* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene*.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Ruskin found Turner's seascapes and landscapes as fecund in associative values as his mythological works. Stating that the painter hardly ever painted even a piece of quiet water without some type of story in it, the English writer praised what he considered the noblest sea picture ever painted, Turner's *Slave Ship*. Quite aside from its infinitely delicate modulations of colour tonalities, the painting was admired for what it said about the forces of nature and the commerce in slaves. The picture's greatness stemmed from the sublimity of the ideas it expressed.<sup>21</sup>

In what sounds extremely prophetic of the fundamental confrontation between the views of Ruskin and those of Whistler, Ruskin wrote about Copley Fielding: 'But there is one point in all his seas deserving especial praise – a marked aim at "character". He desires, especially in his latter works, not so much to produce an agreeable picture, a scientific piece of arrangement, or delightful melody of colour, as to make us feel the utter desolation, the cold, withering, frozen hopelessness of the continuous storm and merciless sea'.<sup>22</sup>

Written almost three decades prior to the trial, this paragraph expresses the real reasons for the litigation. Ruskin both expressed his disapproval of the art for art's sake movement and reaffirmed his belief in the necessity of associative values. During the trial Whistler voiced a view that directly conflicted with Ruskin's. When asked if his *Nocturne in Blue and Silver: Battersea Bridge* was a correct representation of the bridge, a barge, etc., the American artist rejoined: '[m]y whole scheme was only to bring about a certain harmony of colour'.<sup>23</sup> In a letter to *The World* on 22 May 1878, Whistler further advanced his thesis that strikingly anticipated Clive Bell's concept of 'significant form'. He lamented the fact that the vast majority of people could not appreciate a picture except for its dramatic or local interest. With characteristic felicity, he concluded: '[a]s music is the poetry of sound, so is painting the poetry of sight, and the subject-matter has nothing to do with harmony of sound or of colour'.<sup>24</sup>

Leader of the mythic school of painting among Whistler's contemporaries, according to Ruskin, was Edward Burne-Jones. Like Turner before him, Burne-Jones realised for his contemporaries the visions described by sages of the past,

20 Ruskin 1904, vol. 7, p. 404.

21 Ruskin 1904, vol. 1, pp. 376–7.

22 Ruskin 1904, vol. 1, p. 346.

23 Whistler 1971, p. 8.

24 Whistler 1971, p. 127.

thus unveiling 'the hidden splendour of old imagination'.<sup>25</sup> In Ruskin's estimation his immense scholarship allowed him to present the loftiest associations conveyable. The affinity between Burne-Jones and Turner in this respect has been noted by George Landow in *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin* when he stated the critic considered the category of modern mythological painter aptly descriptive of artists as different in style and thought as Turner, Hunt, Rossetti, and Burne-Jones.<sup>26</sup>

The similarity between Turner and Burne-Jones is as pronounced as their dissimilarity from Whistler, if Ruskin's socioeconomic interpretation of their relative merits is accepted. Though he never published it, Ruskin did compose 'My Own Article on Whistler'. Written shortly after the trial, it restated the definition he had given in volume one of *Modern Painters* that the relative value of a picture is contingent on the greatness of its ideas. He underscored this fact, since he thought the aim of many modern artists was ornamentation rather than edification. It was left for the critic to demand that the painter work with his head as well as with his hands, and to explain the distinction between Attic air and London fog.<sup>27</sup>

Implicit in his remarks is the association of Whistler's paintings with the vulgar commercialisation fostered by laissez-faire capitalism. Interestingly enough, Whistler in his lecture, 'Ten O'Clock', attributed his lack of financial success to this same commercialisation of society. Since the artist's paintings were thus devoid of rich literary allusions, Ruskin interpreted them as reflections of the intellectual vacuity of an increasingly materialistic society. He considered Whistler's wilful deletion of associative values to be yet another example of the effort to acquire wealth dishonestly – that is, without contributing to the betterment of society. Both Turner and Burne-Jones transmitted maxims derived from nature and mythology, so that, in Ruskin's opinion, they actually did seek to mitigate social ills. By condemning Whistler's paintings, Ruskin felt he was defending the art world against the debilitating effect of capitalism:

It gives me no little pain to be compelled to point out, as the essential grounds of the present action, the confusion between art and manufacture, which, lately encouraged in the public mind by vulgar economists, has at last, in no small manner, degraded the productions even of distin-

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<sup>25</sup> Ruskin 1908, vol. 33, p. 305.

<sup>26</sup> Landow 1971, p. 449.

<sup>27</sup> Ruskin 1907, p. 587 (*Fors Clavigera*, vol. 29).

guished genius into marketable commodities, with the sale of which it is thought as unwarrantable to interfere as with the convenient dishonesties of popular trade ... The Nineteenth century may perhaps economically pride itself on the adulteration of its products and the slackness of its industries. But it ought at least to instruct the pupils of its schools of Art ... that [the artist's] fame should be founded on what he had given, not on what he had received.<sup>28</sup>

The implications here are clear. To Ruskin, Whistler's art represented manifestations of Adam Smith's economic system, while the art of Turner and Burne-Jones reflected a condemnation of this same system. In volume five of *Modern Painters*, Turner's *Garden of the Hesperides* is interpreted as a great document since it symbolises the lamentable state of Victorian society in which the triumph of Mammon, the love of money, displaced all else. According to Ruskin, Turner's painting proclaimed the predominance of gross materialism, 'Here, in England, is our great spiritual fact for ever interpreted to us – the Assumption of the Dragon'.<sup>29</sup>

One of the first to claim that the state of art delineates the cultural conditions from which it arises was Ruskin. As Arnold Hauser has written, he was also one of the first people in England to emphasise the cultivation of art as one of the most important tasks of the state.<sup>30</sup> In the 1850s, Ruskin had graduated from the class of sheltered aesthete to that of quixotic social reformer. His politics became more idealistic, his art criticism more visionary. The concluding volume of *Modern Painters* reflects this transition, since in designating the audience to whom art should be addressed Ruskin anticipated Tolstoy's *What is Art?*

In the working-class publication *Fors Clavigera*, Ruskin wrote of Burne-Jones's paintings that they possessed 'social beauty' and mirrored 'social distress'.<sup>31</sup> As has been proved in this article, he interpreted these paintings as works of social commentary owing to an unlikely syllogism:

- A. Art should disseminate great ideas for the betterment of the average man.
- B. The mediaeval conceits of Burne-Jones depicted a wistful Utopia comparable to the communist society Ruskin sought to establish through St. George's Guild. Ergo,

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ruskin 1865, vol. 3, p. 408.

<sup>30</sup> Hauser 1950, vol. 2, p. 820.

<sup>31</sup> Ruskin 1907, p. 159.

- c. The works of Burne-Jones disseminated great ideas for the betterment of the average man.

At the same time that Ruskin was proposing for St. George's Guild a directed readings programme consisting of such authors as Chaucer and Dante, he was praising Burne-Jones's paintings for their value as social commentary and denigrating those of Whistler for their lack of it. Thus, only incorrectly could one conclude, as have Robin Ironside and others, that Ruskin's position with regard to Whistler was inconsistent with his own ideas. The real issue between Ruskin and Whistler was whether art should be committed to rectifying social ills or whether it should be created autonomously – an issue of increasing significance to contemporary society.

### Postscript

Now that we have accurately located Ruskin's position within the context of his own thought, we must also view his position within its historical context by critiquing it from a twentieth-century perspective. In fact, the very manner in which Ruskin posed the question of political involvement – within a nineteenth-century conceptual framework – has itself been incisively questioned. Theodor Adorno has written that the most genuine 'engagé' art of the twentieth century has been that which has been 'defamed as formalism'.<sup>32</sup> The apparently autonomous literature of Kafka and Beckett, for example, functions on the level of fundamental attitudes with a content that is inherently ambiguous. It is Adorno's contention that 'every commitment to the world must be abandoned to satisfy the ideal of the committed work of art', so that 'the inescapability of their work compels the change of attitude which committed works merely demand'.<sup>33</sup> Hence, their critique of the existing order is registered through the very formal traits which would seem paradoxically to preclude any definite political posture for their art. As such, the works of Beckett, Kafka, or the surrealists have assumed 'the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics'.<sup>34</sup> They do not counter propaganda against reform with propaganda for reform. By working on the level of attitudes, though, they convey a sense of 'Entfremdung' from present conditions that is a more persuasive propagator

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<sup>32</sup> Adorno 1974, p. 85.

<sup>33</sup> Adorno 1974, p. 86.

<sup>34</sup> Adorno 1974, p. 89.

for concrete reform than any direct appeal ever could be. The immediacy of Beckett's or Breton's position is all the more effective because it does not utilise a formulaic, hence potentially reified, call for change. As Adorno has said of Beckett's works, '[t]hese enjoy what is today the only humanly respectable fame: everyone shudders at them, and yet no-one can persuade himself that these eccentric plays and novels are not about what everyone knows but no-one will admit'.<sup>35</sup>

John Berger, who because of his versatility and his expertise with a pen reminds one of Ruskin, has also questioned the traditional conceptual framework for committed art that Ruskin used. In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger, who has been decidedly influenced by Walter Benjamin, has written:

To be an exception a painter whose vision had been formed by tradition, and who had probably studied as an apprentice or student from the age of sixteen, needed to recognize his vision for what it was, and then to separate it from the usage for which it had been developed. Single-handed he had to contest the norms of the art that formed him. He had to see himself as a painter in a way that denied the seeing of a painter.<sup>36</sup>

Implicit in this passage is the assertion that formal values are actually the most significant political channels of art. By realising a genuinely personal style, the artist humanises the medium through what Ortega has incompletely labelled 'dehumanised' means. In such a situation the artist is interpreted as a rebel against the anachronistic conception of the world endorsed by society. As such, he becomes a reformer without a programme, an architect without a blueprint. The directness of his appeal, however, resides in the degree to which he rehumanises style. By introducing an unprecedented degree of subjectivity into the pictorial idiom, the great artist more closely realises the Hegelian conception of dis-alienation that, for example, Marx took as the starting point for his critique of society. Thus, Berger, unlike Ruskin, could conceivably classify the art of Whistler as emphatically, albeit indirectly, political precisely owing to its formal nonconformity, rather than to any associative values conforming to an established political posture.

35 Adorno 1974, p. 86.

36 Berger 1975a, p. 110.

**Letter to the Editor of *Art Journal* (Frank Cossa, Rutgers University)**

To the Editor:

In the otherwise well argued essay 'Ruskin vs. Whistler: The Case Against Capitalist Art', by David Craven, which appeared in your winter issue, there are, I believe, two errors: one of commission, one of omission.

To dispose of a practical matter first, the Titian portrait of *Doge Andrea Gritti* of 1540 discussed and illustrated in the article is very likely not the one which figured in the Whistler-Ruskin trial. According to Robin Spencer, the picture placed in evidence at the trial was a portrait of this same Doge but showing him in profile. It was thought at the time to be by Titian but is now attributed to Vincenzo Catena and dated 1523–31.<sup>37</sup> The significantly earlier date of this work is important for the argument about 'finish' as it was conducted at the trial and discussed in the Craven article.

As to the question of 'finish', Mr. Craven quite rightly argues for a certain consistency in Ruskin's views on the subject. To the seeming dichotomy in Ruskin's thought, which enabled him to admire both Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites, Ruskin himself made answer:

There is not the slightest inconsistency in the mode in which, throughout this work, I have desired the relative merits of painters to be judged ... Careless readers, who dashed at the descriptions and missed the arguments, took up their own conceptions of the cause of my liking Turner, and said to themselves: 'Turner cannot draw, Turner is generalizing, vague, visionary, and the Pre-Raphaelites are hard and distinct. How can anyone like both?' But *I* never said that Turner could not draw. – *I* never said that he was vague or visionary. – What *I* said was that nobody had ever drawn so well: that nobody was so certain, so *unvisionary*; that nobody had ever given so many hard and downright facts ... Turner is praised for his truth and finish; that truth of which I am beginning to give examples. Pre-Raphaelitism is praised for its truth and finish; and the whole duty inculcated upon the artist is that of being in all respects as like Nature as possible.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Spencer 1972, p. 85 (and illustrated on p. 83).

<sup>38</sup> Ruskin 1881, vol. 3, p. 127.

There is, however, another aspect of Ruskin's virulent dislike for Whistler's *Nocturnes*; a principle, if it may be called that, upon which he was also consistent.

We find the greatest artists mainly divided into two groups – those who paint principally with respect to local colour, headed by Paul Veronese, Titian and Turner; and those who paint principally with reference to light and shade irrespective of colour, headed by Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Raphael ... The main difference is, that with Leonardo, Rembrandt and Raphael, vast masses of the picture are lost in comparatively colourless (dark grey or brown) shadow ... [B]ut with Veronese, Titian, and Turner, the whole picture is like the rose – glowing with colour in the shadows, and rising into paler and more delicate hues, or masses of whiteness in the lights ... Of the three advantages possessed by the colourists over the chiaroscurists, the first is, that they have in the greater portions of their pictures *absolute* truth ... while the chiaroscurists have no absolute truth anywhere.

It is somewhat singular that the indistinctness of treatment which has been so often noticed as characteristic of our present art shows itself always most when there is least apparent reason for it. Modern artists, having some true sympathy with what is vague in nature, draw all that is uncertain and evasive without evasion, and render faithfully whatever can be discerned in faithless mist or mocking vapours; but having no sympathy with what is solid and serene, they seem to become uncertain themselves in proportion to the certainty of what they see ...<sup>39</sup>

By such a standard there is no question but that Whistler, in his *Nocturnes*, must be numbered among the 'chiaroscurists' and the painters of 'faithless mist or mocking vapours'; a branch of painting which was, categorically for Ruskin, inferior. Furthermore, as Joan Evans observed, 'his [Ruskin's] own sketches at this time show a morbid sensitivity to light, and the *Nocturnes* gave him a feeling of menace'.<sup>40</sup> The opinion has long been held that the always fragile state of Ruskin's mind was upset by sudden bursts of light; fireflies and fireworks had a particularly disruptive effect.<sup>41</sup> This being the case, what chance did a Whistler *Nocturne* have of pleasing Ruskin? Apart from all other con-

39 Ruskin 1881, vol. 4, pp. 47–8.

40 Evans 1954, p. 372.

41 Evans 1954, note 2.

siderations, there is the fact, as simple as it is inescapable, that Ruskin did not like dark pictures.<sup>42</sup>

Whether Mr. Craven accepts or rejects this theory, it exists and ought certainly to be acknowledged. It would appear in any case that the issue of Ruskin's consistency in the Whistler matter does not turn entirely on what he meant by 'finish' or even on his view of capitalism but must include his long cherished beliefs about light and colour.

### Craven's Unpublished Reply to Frank Cossa

I would like to thank Frank Cossa, though not without embarrassment, for having noted in your summer issue an oversight in my article on the Ruskin-Whistler trial. Although it does not alter the validity of my position concerning Ruskin's dualistic notion of finish, I was definitely remiss in assuming that the portrait of *Doge Andrea Gritti* shown in the trial was Titian's well-known painting of circa 1540. Fortunately, the Catena painting, because of its more linear and 'finished' manner, is even more disparate from Titian's 'unfinished' late style, than the portrait of the Doge by Titian. As such, my crucial distinction between Ruskin's notion of technical finish, as opposed to his view of conceptual finish, remains correct as a resolution of the seeming paradox in Ruskin's views.

I must, however, also add that Mr. Cossa's references to Ruskin's ideas about local colour vs. chiaroscuro are self-refuting when applied to Whistler's art. Ruskin hardly assessed painters, in the period of the trial, on the basis of whether they primarily emphasised colour values or tonal qualities. To appreciate this obvious fact we need only recall the works of Edward Burne-Jones, with their dominant dark-greens and blues, which Ruskin immensely admired because he felt they expressed social commentary. Like Whistler, whom Mr. Cossa classes with 'chiaroscurists' such as Leonardo da Vinci that Ruskin 'always' deemed inferior to colourists, Burne-Jones would unquestionably also be a 'chiaroscurist', rather than a 'local colourist'.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, it should be remembered that because of their use of dark tones, rather than bright local colours, both Whistler and Burne-Jones influenced Symbolist painters, as well

42 An exception, of course, is Ruskin's high regard for Tintoretto. It is, at best, a thankless task looking for consistency in someone who said he never felt he was approaching the truth unless he had contradicted himself at least three times.

43 Kenneth Clark has noted a certain affinity in sensibility between Burne-Jones and Leonardo; see Clark 1963, p. 142.



as Picasso's Blue Period.<sup>44</sup> Thus, if Mr. Cossa's emphasis on and interpretation of this issue were correct: 1) Ruskin proclaimed Burne-Jones the best artist of his day and Whistler the worst for precisely the same reasons at exactly the same time, 2) Ruskin had a 'chiaroscurist' testify against a 'chiaroscurist' for not being a 'local colourist' (in fact, Burne-Jones praised Whistler's use of 'atmosphere', while condemning his lack of 'finish'), 3) Ruskin made an issue both of 'finish' and social import, while *forgetting* to do so about his 'long cherished beliefs in light and colour'.

In fact, Ruskin did none of the above. He obviously did not condemn Whistler for using a 'chiaroscurist' manner. Rather he denounced Whistler for the *way* in which he used this style. Unlike the tonal manner of Burne-Jones, with its mythopoeic overtones, Whistler's style was intentionally devoid of those characteristics that in Ruskin's mind would have justified emphatically a 'chiaroscurist' approach. Consequently, Whistler's paintings would not have been so much 'dark' as 'blank' to Ruskin. The issue here, as with the matter of 'finish', is how Ruskin related formal traits such as dark tonalities to a more sophisticated position involving social import.

The lengthy quotation by Ruskin that Mr. Cossa uses as an argument against tonal painters such as Whistler was written before 1856 when it first appeared in Volume IV of *Modern Painters*.<sup>45</sup> Conceived at least twenty-one years before Ruskin's review of Whistler, this passage is from a book that pre-dates Ruskin's overriding concern with socio-economic issues. As Kenneth Clark has shown, it was only after Volume IV was published, that Ruskin decided to 'devote himself to exposing the wickedness and stupidity of *laissez faire* economics'.<sup>46</sup> Hence, Volume V of *Modern Painters* of 1860 (as noted in my article) was the first of this series to reflect somewhat the political views that in *Unto this Last* (1860) would cause Ruskin to be for a time 'almost ostracised'.<sup>47</sup> *Fors Clavigera*, the publication about art and politics in which Ruskin's review of Whistler appeared, was not started until 1871. This is why the intent of my article about Ruskin was to show that he was consistent on the matter of 'finish', but not that he consistently related 'finish' to political import in all phases of his career.

44 Hamilton 1967, p. 142.

45 Mr. Cossa refers to an edition of the book published in 1881. It remains, however, incontrovertible that neither the 1856 edition nor the later ones reflect Ruskin's transformed views on art and politics.

46 Clark, 1964, pp. 9–10. Furthermore, as Clark notes, 'He became convinced that he must not only write in condemnation of the capitalist system, but he must also take positive action. In *Fors Clavigera* for May 1871, he outlined a scheme for a sort of agrarian communism'.

47 Ibid.

While I showed that Ruskin was not self-contradictory with regard to Whistler, I did not contend that Ruskin was without contradiction. Unquestionably, Ruskin's view changed considerably over the years. Although I took this change into account, Mr. Cossa did not.

As for Joan Evans's theory that Whistler's painting of fireworks upset 'the always fragile state of Ruskin's mind', I did in fact disregard this opinion. It seemed to me unnecessary to cast further doubt on the implausible. The issue in the trial was not that Whistler painted offensive subjects, but that his offense was 'subjectless' paintings. Had Ruskin really been so sensitive to fireworks in Whistler's *Nocturne*, he doubtlessly would have made some references, oblique or otherwise, to the unacceptability of this subject. Instead, Ruskin's only allusion to Whistler's subject matter in 'My Own Article on Whistler' was to 'London fog'. The fact that he found Whistler's night scene of Battersea bridge to be as emotionally incendiary as Whistler's little fireworks display makes it incontrovertible that Ruskin was not unduly impressed by the particular content of either. Rather, he was upset by the overriding formal concerns of both. For Ruskin the issue of content, like that of tonal values, concerned the *way* in which the subject was handled.

## The Critique-Poésie of Thomas Hess

To be first in reacting favourably to a type of art is hardly the same as establishing an important critical precedent for approaching it. As Valéry noted, writing based on enthusiasm alone is ignoble. Just as art is significant insofar as it fosters a critical dialogue with viewers, so responses to art are important as art criticism insofar as they include critical reflections about these responses. Unqualified acceptance debases art by dissipating criticism. As is widely recognised, *Art News* under the leadership of Thomas Hess ‘was central to the development of post-World War II American art’, and Hess was ‘famous for his early, eloquent championing of the Abstract Expressionists’.<sup>1</sup> This essay will deal with Hess’s early approach to Abstract Expressionism. The result will be an explication of how Hess’s position engendered critical insights into this art, rather than just fine sentiments about it.

Certainly Hess, known for his ‘passionate prose’,<sup>2</sup> was aware that the consummation of such a relationship through criticism entailed more than the urbane outpourings of a refined sensibility. Nonetheless, he wrote about his art with such evocative sensitivity, that Barbara Rose has called it a ‘kind of critique-poesie’. Writing by Hess features a rare fusion of poetic prose – normally characteristic of involved appreciation – with penetrating criticism – often characterised by coolly detached prose. The reason for this distinctive criticism is attributed by Barbara Rose to Hess’s supposedly extrinsic use of Surrealist ‘free association’ which was controlled by his ‘disciplined, rationalist mind’ and anchored concretely by his ‘art-historical background’. As this article will reveal, however, Hess’s prose poetry, with its epigrammatic turns and ironic twists, was a result of his critical method, as well as of his deft selection of words through it.<sup>3</sup> This poetic criticism was not in spite of, but because of his use of a cognitive mode which the Surrealists endorsed with much more fanfare, yet much less effect. Hence, Hess’s mode of acquiring knowledge will become apparent when the poetic dimension of his criticism is disclosed.

A major reason for Rose’s misreading of Hess’s modernist poetic prose is her implicit use of the classical definition of poetry. ‘Poetic’ in the days of classicism

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1 Baker 1978, p. 8.

2 Rose 1978, p. 11.

3 Rose 1978, p. 12.

was, as Roland Barthes has noted, an ornamental variation of prose that was attained through verbal expertise, not by means of special coherence.<sup>4</sup> Modern poetry has inverted, however, the assumed relationship between thought and language in classical poetry. In contradistinction to classical poetry which translated ready-made thought into more elegant utterances, modern poetry uses words to produce 'a kind of formal continuum from which there emerges an intellectual or emotional density which would have been impossible without them'.<sup>5</sup> Significantly, Hess did not use Surrealist 'free association' to embellish otherwise independent thought. His word usage was modernist because it was inextricably part of his cognitive process for approaching the art. These words concretely disclose Hess's view of the art; they are not, as in classical writing, the decorative transcription of a possible prose. Just as Jean-Claude Chevalier has observed that the 'gôut du paradoxe'<sup>6</sup> is a major aspect of modern poetry, so Hess's notable use of paradox is intrinsic to his acute recognition of polarities and counter-forces in the art he is assaying. In this case as in others, Hess's poetic criticism is modernist because its poetry is a substance rather than an attribute, a *sui generis* component that carries its own nature within itself. Only by examining Hess's critical approach as a whole, can the poetic character of it be understood.

## I

Although the first established art journal to run features on Abstract Expressionists was the *Magazine of Art* from 1948 to 1951, the second publication to do so was *Art News* which, as Irving Sandler has noted, ignored the Abstract Expressionists until Thomas Hess became its managing editor in January 1948.<sup>7</sup> From then on *Art News* increasingly focused on these artists until in the 1950s this magazine became, as Dore Ashton has observed, the leading advocate of Abstract Expressionist painting.<sup>8</sup> The silence of *Art News* through the mid-1940s about de Kooning, Pollock, et al. contrasts interestingly with the fact that this magazine was probably the first member of the art press to mention Jackson Pollock's work, a reference which occurred in 1942.<sup>9</sup> Hess began his asso-

4 Barthes 1983, pp. 41–2.

5 Barthes 1983, p. 43.

6 Chevalier 1970, p. 12.

7 Sandler 1971, p. 212.

8 Ashton 1972, p. 158.

9 O'Connor 1967, p. 26.

ciation with *Art News* as an Editorial Assistant in February 1946. Promoted to Associate Editor in April 1947, Hess seemed at first to endorse the journal's conservative posture. In 'Triple Play to Center' (April 1947), one of Hess's earliest extended articles, the Whitney Annual was reviewed. His comments included a favourable reference to Andrew Wyeth's *Crystal Lamp*, along with 'places of honour' for a Robert Motherwell collage as well as for works by I. Rice Pereira, Jacob Lawrence and Milton Avery.<sup>10</sup> Concerning the selection policy of the Whitney, Hess had supportive comments about its 'new technique of stopping in mid-air – to be precise, just a shade closer to the right than the left'. This half-way position was deemed 'a most ideal state for a large annual', because '[b]y juxtaposing traditions, by placing the young with the old and the good with the bad, one can examine the youth and death of styles and the boundless vitality and complexity of American art'.

In these early articles Hess used a type of pedestrian journalism which markedly contrasted with his later manner. Nonetheless, a basic premise of Hess's significant criticism was divulged in it: a period perspective must deal with a complex network of counter currents, rather than with a slick notion of the mainstream that circumscribes the art. As Hess later wrote, 'the history of art is like a kaleidoscope'.<sup>11</sup> Precisely because Hess did approach art with this contextual sophistication, he avoided the shallow-based period formalism which made occasional, but usually facile overtures to ideas.

The January 1948 issue of *Art News* inaugurated Hess's new appointment as Managing Editor, the position which he used so effectively on behalf of the Abstract Expressionists. This issue was still dominated by the cautious moderation of Editor Alfred M. Frankfurter. Hess himself wrote an essay on John Marin with the conventional assessment that he was one of the greatest living American artists. It should be recalled that as late as 1948 Clement Greenberg, the early champion of Pollock, referred to Marin as probably the greatest living American artist.<sup>12</sup>

Immediately ensuing issues of *Art News* evinced a significant, if not dramatic, departure from this position of cool reticence with regard to newer abstractionists. The April 1948 publication featured something new, an article with the name of an Abstract Expressionist painter in the title. Even though 'Spotlight on: Evergood, Cushing, Harnett, Hartley, Miró, de Kooning' included only a concise paragraph about each with a reproduction of one work by each

<sup>10</sup> Hess 1947, p. 35 and p. 59.

<sup>11</sup> Hess 1951a, p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> Greenberg 1961, p. 181.

in a safe cross-section, the passage about de Kooning was noteworthy. Written by Renée Arb, the very positive discussion of de Kooning's New York debut (Egan Gallery), reflected incisive ideas about his art that Hess and Harold Rosenberg were later to develop more fully. Reference was made to de Kooning's 'singular concentration of passion and technique' and his use of a 'constant tension as space envelopes and then releases these ambiguous forms', so that 'his subject seems to be the crucial intensity of the creative process itself'.<sup>13</sup> Here, as in other cases, Hess the editor succeeded in aptly using writing by another, which corresponded to and was doubtlessly influenced by his own views, to promote Abstract Expressionism. Arb's concern with synthetic elements – fusions of spontaneity with training, subject with object – was reminiscent of Hess's focus on the rich interchanges necessary for significant art.

In this respect, Hess assembled criticism like Marcel Duchamp's 'real collectors'. Unlike those who merely buy pictures for investment value, Duchamp's collector was an artist *au carré* who painted himself a collection.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Hess not only constructed criticism favourable to Abstract Expressionism by selecting certain people to write it, e.g., Arb, Elaine de Kooning or Robert Goodnough, he also subtly used the divergent approaches of other critics to realise his own critical method. In the Summer 1952 issue of *Art News*, for example, Hess engineered with brilliant irony a kaleidoscopic fusion of critical approaches that was much more multi-faceted than any of the methods incorporated into it. He included an essay by Herbert Read, 'Farewell to Formalism', that promoted a symbolic criticism opposed to the formalism of Roger Fry, yet also in this issue was a formalist article by Clement Greenberg, the heir to Fry's views. Similarly, Read and to a greater extent Siegfried Giedion in another article advocated a criticism involved with the 'essential' condition of humanity, while the Marxist critic Arnold Hauser promulgated an expansive historicism. The result of this ironic combination was more than an 'objective' look at different critical perspectives, since taken together these contradictory views formed an open-ended framework that characterised Hess's kaleidoscopic criticism at its best, e.g., in his books about de Kooning. We are reminded that irony, which can use negativity in a positive way, is as Kierkegaard wrote, an 'underhanded patron' as fond of tricking friends as adversaries.<sup>15</sup> By acknowledging the strengths of these divergent approaches, while at the same time paradoxically superimposing them so as to tacitly underscore their weaknesses, Hess used

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13 Hess 1948a, p. 33.

14 Hess in Motherwell and Reinhardt 1951, p. 36.

15 Kierkegaard 1965, p. 265.

them synthetically, advancing yet negating them for his own ends. Significantly, Hess used methodologic irony, as did Kierkegaard, in a post-Hegelian sense that did not hinge on an absolute.

In the same article of the April 1948 issue that featured the unprecedented focus on de Kooning a section on Miró was included by Hess. This paragraph is one of the earliest examples of the 'critique poésie' for which Hess is known. Writing about Miró's style from the 1940s, Hess noted epigrammatically: 'Miró has consistently created symbols of menacing laughter with his precise actors looming against smudges of lyrical colour'.<sup>16</sup> When in March 1951 Hess again wrote about Miró in *Art News*, it was with even greater sensitivity to the same effects – forms which 'still scamper with cheerful violence' on backgrounds 'light in tone and heavy with texture' from Miró's 'Never-Never Land' situated near his world-famous farm in Catalonia.<sup>17</sup> Hess's finely honed remarks contain a notable fusion of seemingly antithetical words which grew out of his experience of Miró's art. Hence, Hess's review simultaneously derived from, yet highlighted, the paintings by using what in poetry is called alliteration and oxymorons.

Miró's interest in the dialectical resolution of dream and reality into surreality, as stated by André Breton, was effectively addressed by Hess's interest in counter-forces and polarities. Here as in all his best criticism, Hess displayed an impressive awareness of how art united contradictory elements. Thus his language, part of this critical process, was replete with ironic fusions and oxymoronic phrases that did not ornament his view of the art, but concretely expressed it. The consequent poetry of his reviews was not a result of Surrealist 'free association', but of Hess's choice of words in response to issues he did not freely choose.

Hess's criticism was both poetic and incisive insofar as it realised the acuity of his observations about art he did not create but interpretively 'completed'. For this reason, Hess's use of words had a critical dimension that Breton's 'free' appreciations do not. Because of his contextual self-consciousness, Hess was free of the naiveté that made the Surrealists unaware of their contextual 'fetters'. He acknowledged what Merleau-Ponty has stated, that there is no completely subconscious response anymore than there is a totally conscious one, that there is no purely emotional response any more than there is a solely intellectual one. This self-reflective turn made Hess's critical approach more synthetic than the 'purely' subconscious essays that Breton erroneously

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16 Hess 1948a, p. 33.

17 Hess 1951b, p. 44.

considered dialectical. As Jean-Paul Sartre has noted, Surrealism was 'an addition, a mixture, but never a synthesis'.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, the subjective extreme advocated by Surrealism led to an escapist disassociation from the rational that made it a victim of the idealism which it had so fought against. Conversely, Hess contended that no 'pure' responses were possible: 'As soon as painting is approached, interpretation begins: observation becomes translation'. Art and its viewers exist in 'an atmosphere filled with multiple-meanings'.<sup>19</sup>

A review by Hess in the December 1948 issue of *Art News*, 'The Whitney: exhibit Abstract', broke the ice critically for Abstract Expressionism. In a sense, Hess's article must be seen as a rejoinder to editor Alfred Frankfurter's 'A Handful of Promise', which had appeared in the January 1948 issue of *Art News*. Referring to abstract art as a possibly moribund idiom, Frankfurter decided that the only promising work shown was by Stephen Green, Sidney Gross, and four other young artists who showed signs of a return to nature.<sup>20</sup> In contradistinction to this view, however, Hess maintained that the latest Whitney showed that there were at least as many good abstractionists as there were realists.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Hess believed that one particular 'group of abstractions dominates the Whitney by their vitality and wealth of imagination'. Unlike the anachronistic abstract pictures by artists like George L.K. Morris, e.g., his *Unequal Forces*, the paintings by Bradley Walker Tomlin, Adolph Gottlieb and Philip Guston were innovative and successful. 'Outstanding in this group', however, was the work by Willem de Kooning:

A curiously milk-and-marble white ground on which plays an exploring, almost capricious line that would seem automatic if it did not wander so carefully through the thick layers of texture ... But it is obvious that de Kooning is trying for a good deal more than pleasing pigment in new arrangements. There is a definite attempt to suggest sensation by association.<sup>22</sup>

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18 Sartre 1965, p. 189. Sartre's observation confirms this failure of surrealism, since as Breton wrote in *Les Manifestes du Surréalisme* [1955] the dialectical method would be used when Surrealism finished 'avec l'idealisme proprement' (p. 12). Similarly, Walter Benjamin said of Surrealism that it involved 'an inadequate, undialectical conception of the nature of intoxication'; Benjamin 1978, p. 55.

19 Hess 1951a, p. 10.

20 Frankfurter 1948, pp. 20–1.

21 Hess 1948b, p. 24.

22 Hess 1948b, p. 59.



This early review of de Kooning's work not only presaged Hess's later writings about this artist, which include two significant monographs, it also presupposed a sophisticated position he merely developed more extensively in later works. It was already clear in this passage that Hess's review was more than art journalism tinged with value judgments. Implicit in his remarks was an historical grounding of the formal traits that precluded the glib pronouncements about taste which float groundlessly in reviews where 'feeling is all'. As Hess stated in *Abstract Painting* (1951), 'abstract art both reflects and is itself a way of life ... a social act'.<sup>23</sup> He then concluded with a position not unlike the Whistler-Wilde life-imitates-art maxim: 'The environment that the modern world chooses to accept ... has been found to resemble the images of modern art'. Thus, de Kooning's painting was considered significant not only for its formal innovations, but *also* for what these formal innovations connoted in extra-aesthetic senses. Pictorial components featuring a synthesis of forms – determinate yet indeterminate, seemingly spontaneous yet seductively controlled – were seen to be doing more than activating the canvas through a surface tension in an all-over pattern of gestural brushstrokes. As Hess later wrote, 'the crisis of modern art' represented, at least in part, a creative response to the crisis of culture: 'Nothing is less clear than geometry', de Kooning once wrote. 'Life as we live it, obviously, is a matter of endless ambiguities and proliferating meanings; transparencies upon transparencies make an image that, while it blurs in super-impositions, takes on the actuality of rocks'.<sup>24</sup>

Consequently, Hess observed that 'The dialectic between the revelation of this mystery and the ordering powers at the artist's command is, I believe, the content of de Kooning's art'.<sup>25</sup> Hess recognised that de Kooning, like his compatriot Van Gogh, expressed 'Nordic' content – 'the existence of secret anguish'. Yet he also saw that de Kooning worked out of the 'Paris tradition of disinterested, pictorial means',<sup>26</sup> so that Lawrence Alloway could remark that de Kooning was a late Cubist in comparison to Still and Newman.<sup>27</sup> Significantly, Hess's use of the term 'Abstract Expressionism', applied to de Kooning and the others, involved a more sophisticated application of it than was common in most other criticism. For Hess the term was a synthetic one which allowed for both the French, i.e., 'Abstract' or more formal tradition, and the Nordic, i.e., 'Expressionist' or more content oriented tradition. In fact, sculptor Philip Pavia

23 Hess 1951a, p. 4. (The following quotation is also from this source.)

24 Hess 1959, p. 15.

25 Ibid.

26 Hess 1951a, pp. 99–100.

27 Alloway 1959, pp. 25–6.

noted that ‘the Germanic twist of “abstract expressionism” I never heard till Thomas B. Hess mentioned the two esthetic strains’.<sup>28</sup> Hess’s ‘poetic’ criticism – his unique and unlikely coupling of words – was related to his profound understanding of how these polarities were aesthetically fused. Not surprisingly, the more self-consciously synthetic the art, the more accessible it was to Hess’s critical approach. For this reason, de Kooning was considered by Hess to be the greatest *‘peinture de la vie moderne’*.

De Kooning was, however, much more than another Constantin Guys, since he became for Hess what Delacroix had been to Baudelaire. Indeed, even Hess’s description of the ‘hidden *chef-d’école*’<sup>29</sup> of Abstract Expressionism was reminiscent of, if not consciously analogous to, Baudelaire’s panegyric about the leader of Romanticism. De Kooning was a leftist who shunned ideologies, an individual who like Delacroix disdained groups while becoming ‘a numinous leader’ of the avant-garde. Not unlike Baudelaire’s Delacroix, de Kooning was more than just a painter, but rather a total person for whom ‘Art was a way of life that, far from being an “anti-progress”, ivory tower position, took in the whole intellectual world’.<sup>30</sup> Delacroix had been to Baudelaire ‘passionately in love with passion, and coldly determined to seek the means of expressing it’. De Kooning was to Hess ‘fanatically antifanatic’ whose position, ‘one of the few tenable ones left for an artist, became a kind of programless program’. Just as the ideal dandy was realised for Baudelaire in the aloof and aristocratic demeanour of Delacroix, so for Hess the likewise epigrammatic de Kooning had ‘an aristocrat’s sense of irony and manners’. Nonetheless, unlike the arrogantly elite Delacroix, whom Baudelaire considered a sort of innate patrician of the senses, de Kooning was an ‘aristocrat’ for Hess, because he attained greater authenticity in an existential, most particularly Sartrean sense. His distinction came from the fact that he demanded more of himself than others, rather than because he assumed more for himself than others. Unlike an aristocrat, de Kooning’s pre-eminence was arrived at experientially through a profound interaction with an historical situation he simultaneously called into question. In Hess’s view, de Kooning worked on behalf of humanity, in spite of society, from a leftist position that had also been ‘an antagonistic part of the generally Communist-oriented activities’, of the intelligentsia in the 1930s. Thus, de Kooning’s position, characterised by what Nietzsche earlier called the ‘pathos

28 Pavia 1960, p. 8.

29 Hess 1959, p. 13.

30 Hess 1959, p. 11. All the following quotations, with the exception of the one by Baudelaire, are from this source, pp. 11–15.

of distance' or what Hess referred to continually as his 'oddball' status, was an intense manifestation of history, not a result of isolated 'genius'.

Hess saw that de Kooning's paintings were 'based on contradictions kept contradictory in order to reveal the clarity of ambiguities'. Because of the richly uneasy interchange between life and art in de Kooning's pictures, they were unlike the simple, one-dimensional art which was either purportedly 'apolitical' or exclusively 'political', both types of which were naively 'undialectical'. In Hess's opinion, 'The social protest inherent in modern painting – its essential aspects that shock or startle or disgust at first sight – was muffled in a 'big yes' of specialised professional taste (that only de Kooning's *Women* have been able to contradict since)'. Revealingly, when Hess authored 'De Kooning Paints a Picture' in *Art News* (March 1953), he discussed the painting of *Woman* (1950–2), which was then controversial and was in fact treated with dilettantish incomprehension by Henry McBride in the very next issue of *Art News*.<sup>31</sup> An art fecund with paradoxes resulted, an art 'sometimes fragmented, often mysterious, always expressed as a complex of culture (instead of the usual simplification of Paris)'.<sup>32</sup> This was the price de Kooning paid for working with one of the 'most awesomely complicated of modern techniques' on which he imposed 'the most self-critical of methods'.<sup>33</sup> The unresolved complexity of this art was rightly recognised by Hess, however, as the reason for de Kooning's greatness. Hess affirmed that de Kooning lived to the fullest the contradictions of this period. When in the April 1951 *Art News* Hess wrote about de Kooning's show 'which surprisingly is only the second for this artist', he stated that the pictures of de Kooning had 'an air of authority-in-crisis perhaps unique in contemporary expression. The dilemma is of the time'.<sup>34</sup>

In early 1949 Hess wrote short reviews of Adolph Gottlieb's show at the Jacques Seligman Gallery (February issue) and of Mark Rothko's exhibition at Parson's (April issue). Hess's reaction to their work was generally favourable, although it was more ambivalent than it had been toward de Kooning's. Unorthodox paragraphs combined observations that Gottlieb had 'more than anyone else given the word "totemic" an opprobrious meaning in right-wing circles' with statements that 'he had succeeded in translating Oceania and the Gold Coast into an idiom adaptable to modern penthouses'.<sup>35</sup> Having declared the titles of Gottlieb's work to be pretentious (as Greenberg had earlier claimed

31 McBride 1953, p. 47.

32 Hess 1951c, p. 24.

33 Hess 1951a; also Hess 1959, p. 100.

34 Ibid.

35 Hess 1949a, p. 49 and p. 58.

of Pollock's titles) Hess added that Gottlieb had nevertheless achieved a 'new complexity and freedom'. This evaluation of Gottlieb was similar to Hess's *early* view of the myth-makers, i.e., Newman, Still, Gottlieb, Rothko, Reinhardt, et al. While Hess's position entailed some incisive observations, it was unfortunately a less complex assessment than his view of de Kooning. An extended discussion in *Abstract Painting* (1951) of Gottlieb – whose *Romanesque Facade* was the first Abstract Expressionist painting to appear on the cover of *Art News* (March 1951) – clarified the reason for Hess's restrained appreciation of his art.

Concerning the myth-makers' position, Hess noted that, 'In theory, the idea is quite simple and noble: to re-vitalise form by conceiving of it as a part of magic, or myth, or preconscious knowledge'.<sup>36</sup> He added, however, that Gottlieb had been successful in his art by being untrue to the implications of his position. This self-refutation resulted from a lack of self-consciousness. Gottlieb, like the other myth-makers, desired to reach a primitive state outside history from a sophisticated position characteristic of a certain period in history. As Hess noted, writing of their primitivism, 'nothing could be further from the methods or the products of artists working in cultures concerned with myth than the act of creating myth'. A primitivist desire for a simple, instinctual life style is hardly the same as a primitive unawareness of alternatives that are not instinctive. Thus, Hess disclosed the tenuousness of the myth-makers' assertion that 'only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art'.<sup>37</sup>

As Jose Ortega y Gasset once noted, people are themselves and their circumstances. Unlike the contradictory situations embodied synthetically in de Kooning's art, the contradictory position of the myth-makers resulted from their avoidance and attempted 'transcendence' of these problems. While the paradoxes of de Kooning's art were engendered by his creative response to immanent cultural issues, the paradoxes of the myth-makers were generated to a greater degree by escapist wishes which ironically bore witness to the historical context they sought to escape. As such, the myth-makers' intent was anti-synthetic; they wished to circumvent social and aesthetic contradictions by arriving at an assumed state of primordial unity. Hess's critique was penetrating insofar as he saw that their presumed affinity with primitive art was only partially tenable and that their thoughts about this connection were not sufficiently self-reflective. Unfortunately, having shown this fault in their inten-

36 Hess 1951a, p. 125. All quotations preceding the next footnote are from this source.

37 See McCoubrey 1965, p. 210 for a reprint of this letter to the *New York Times* [June 13, 1943], signed by Rothko and Gottlieb.

tionality, Hess was not really able to justify the significance of their art except in formalist terms which, in the case of de Kooning, he had already conceded were not enough. Unlike some later critics, Hess failed to show how theories with implausible premises nevertheless fostered in their case an art with an iconography of the sublime.<sup>38</sup> More importantly, Hess did not explain why their desire for 'transcendence', even if unrealised, was itself a profound indication of artistic alienation from a certain period, as Wilhelm Worringer had shown much abstraction to be, particularly that of the avant-garde.

The uncertainty of Hess's position concerning the myth-makers is seen in his review (April 1949) of Rothko's first show of his colour field paintings. Writing about the change in Rothko's style, Hess noted that it was 'surprising to find that today he has almost entirely abandoned his magnificent calligraphy for abstractions of flat, thin, colored areas that float like clouds or fall like heavy rain over the large canvases'.<sup>39</sup> Stating that the pictures did not work 'by color alone', Hess said that they involved an impressive emotional strength. Because of their oriental reticence, he felt that Rothko's works simultaneously surpassed, yet failed to equal Whistler's paintings: the grandiose ambition which triggered them was not completely successful. Thus Rothko's work 'resulted in the ambiguity of the decoration which cannot be decorative'.<sup>40</sup> Since Hess sensed a certain anxiety in Rothko's desire to use the most reductive formal components for a supra-formalist statement, he was favourably disposed to this work. Nonetheless, Hess obviously believed that the simplified formal elements, along with Rothko's theoretical simplicity, amounted to a much less complexly dialectical, hence less profound, art than that of de Kooning. This was why in the early years of his criticism Hess preferred the gestural Abstract Expressionists to the colour-field painters.

In May 1949 a significant new column was added to *Art News*, the one entitled '... paints a picture' (or '... makes a sculpture'). Although Ben Shahn was the first artist about whom Hess wrote, the column was unquestionably tailored for Action Painters like Pollock, de Kooning, Hofmann, and Tworlov (all later featured in it) for whom the act of painting was as important as the work which resulted. Similarly, the aim of this new section was obviously in keeping with the sensibility expressed in Harold Rosenberg's famous discussion of 'Action Painting', the word he coined in *Art News* (December 1952), Allan Kaprow's explication of 'Happenings' as the heir to Action Painting (*Art News*,

38 See, for example, Alloway 1975, pp. 31–41. Also, see a critique of 'transcendence' in Kuspit 1978, pp. 120–5.

39 Hess 1949b, pp. 48–9.

40 Ibid.

October 1958), and Meyer Schapiro's consideration of Abstract Expressionism as 'more passionately than ever before, the occasion of spontaneity or intense feeling' (*Art News*, Summer 1957). Influenced by Paul Valéry, whom he sometimes quoted,<sup>41</sup> Hess recognised that the process of creativity was as important as the object it brought into being. Thus, he understood what formalists have continually missed: the act of creativity initiates a process, only one aspect of which is the art object, which the critical reception of the work incessantly sustains and *can* profoundly advance when 'all' other aspects of the process are considered. To look 'only' at the art object is to comprehend little, because the unending process of which it is a part is otherwise aborted. Hess was unquestionably aware that the Abstract Expressionists saw their art from similar perspectives, for as Barnett Newman stated, 'the idea of a "finished" picture is a fiction'.<sup>42</sup> When at a discussion group in Studio 35 (21 April 1950) several Abstract Expressionists addressed the issue of 'finish', most agreed with Motherwell that 'what is a "finished" object is not so certain'. Furthermore, Abram Lassaw concluded that, 'It would be better to consider a work of art as a process that is started by the artist'. In 'Ben Shahn paints a picture', although in a more colourless journalism than usual, Hess showed how this process orientation worked. He simultaneously located Shahn's work contextually in an uncircumscribable process and justified the need for such an expansive contextual approach in the future. The opening paragraph cogently christened this enterprise: 'To trace the metamorphosis of one painting, *Nocturne*, by Ben Shahn, from the first glimmer of idea to the final touch of the brush, one would need a detailed history of the artist's personality ... Also needed, of course, would be an exhaustive stylistic analysis ... *Nocturne*, executed in January and February of 1949, is a product of the total personality, but cannot sum it up'.<sup>43</sup>

A review by Hess in *Art News* (November 1949) of Ad Reinhardt's show at Parsons reveals Hess's own inadequacies as a critic. Not surprisingly, 'this promising young abstractionist' was rated highly insofar as 'he caught the burning yellows and oranges of sunlight, the acid purples of the native cottons and the absorbent greens of the moist vegetation [where he had painted in the West Indies]'.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, 'In other works, based on large free-forms,

41 In fact, Hess even referred to Valéry's unduly extreme position in this respect when he wrote, 'The means cannot be separated from the ends in the finished work (as Valéry would like to do for all Art)'. See Hess 1959, p. 27.

42 Motherwell and Reinhardt 1951, p. 12. The ensuing quotations by Motherwell and Lassaw are from the same source and page.

43 Hess 1949c, p. 20.

44 Hess 1949d, p. 50.

the organisation seems so tentative, the conception so awkwardly planned, that the result is only confusion'. In other words, Hess considered Reinhardt's art to be successful only insofar as it expressed a forceful interaction between life and art. A notable difference in handling can be seen in Hess's review, in the same issue of *Art News*, of Jack Tworkov's work. Accompanied by a full page reproduction of Tworkov's *Figure* – an unprecedented emphasis in the review section – Hess's review of 'one of the most masterful artists of his generation' was much more incisive and poetic than his commonplace look at Reinhardt.<sup>45</sup> In Tworkov's 'landscapes and figure pieces one finds statements at once reticent and eloquent, emotional and disciplined'. Complex pictorial tension is generated by his attempt 'to anneal the anatomy of a seated figure or an apple to the taut surface of the canvas, yet still retain the freedoms and connotations of three dimensions'. Understandably, these intense and textured paintings were closer to de Kooning, hence more accessible and acceptable to Hess.

Perhaps the most penetrating look at Reinhardt's work by Hess was in *Abstract Painting* (1951). In this book it was noted that unlike de Kooning's attitude towards art, 'Reinhardt would prefer to have it know nothing – save its own material presence'.<sup>46</sup> Here Hess seems to have implied that Reinhardt, who had 'in a way, followed Rothko', was unaware of what much avant-garde art, most obviously Duchamp's readymades, had already shown – no art is pure because all art is composed of its 'impure' contexts, as well as of 'pure' objects. Hence, reductive art is radically 'purified' only in a formal sense; it is hardly freed from contextual implications or meanings. Unfortunately, however, Hess increasingly became an apologist for Reinhardt, whose art he really only partly understood. In the December 1953 *Art News* Hess wrote an article on Reinhardt's art, 'Reinhardt: the Position and Perils of Purity', in which he reiterated the artist's views. His article was less a critique, than a reluctant aesthetic collaboration, which contended that Reinhardt's black paintings could in fact 'make your eyes rock ... the energy is there'.<sup>47</sup> Referring to Reinhardt's hackneyed notion of aesthetic purification and historical inevitability, as well as his glib 'anti-definitions' of art, Hess merely observed that Reinhardt's position had 'many difficulties'. Ultimately, Hess was forced into a formalist position that lacked any poetic insights into Reinhardt's art. Consequently, Hess failed to deal with Reinhardt's interest in going beyond art through art, an important

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45 Hess 1949e, pp. 44–5.

46 Hess 1959, p. 145.

47 Hess 1953, p. 26.

characteristic of much avant-garde art. Furthermore, he neglected to discuss Reinhardt's aesthetic insofar as it pursued a religious transcendence, similar to that of his friend Thomas Merton or of Zen Buddhism.<sup>48</sup> Reinhardt's aesthetic, which was purportedly unsullied by dialectical interchange with anything 'inartistic', remained ironically free from Hess's usually profound critical notations.

In '8 Excellent, 20 good, 133 others' in the January 1950 issue of *Art News*, Hess further underscored the significance of Abstract Expressionism, most particularly the gestural masters. Singled out for special consideration were works by Marin, Pollock, and de Kooning, with the most attention going to 'De Kooning's all but unrecognisable figures – whose sections interchange with the marvellously confusing rapidity of images in metaphysical verse'.<sup>49</sup> Paintings by these three, along with Hofmann's *The Red Table* and Motherwell's *Painting* made it clear 'that America's young school of abstract art is one of our distinguished contributions to twentieth-century culture'.

Ensuing reviews by Hess of the colour-field branch of Abstract Expressionism were highlighted by ambivalent criticism. A case in point is the curious review Hess wrote (*Art News*, April 1950) of Barnett Newman's first one man show:

Barnett Newman, one of Greenwich Village's best known homespun aestheticians, recently presented some of the products of his meditations ... These are large canvases painted in one even layer of colour (scarlet, yellow, blue, etc.) and on which runs a vertical line (or lines) of white or a contesting hue. There were some terrific optical illusions: if you stared closely at the big red painting with the thin white stripe, its bottom seemed to shoot out at your ankles, and the rectangular canvas itself appeared widely distorted. It is quite like what happens to a hen when its beak is put on the ground and a chalk line drawn away from it on the floor. However, very few spectators actually become hypnotised. But then there was no interest here for the average spectator. Newman is not out to shock the bourgeoisie – that has been done. He likes to shock other artists.<sup>50</sup>

48 See, for example, 'Five Unpublished Letters from Ad Reinhardt to Thomas Merton and Two in Return', *Artforum*, 17, (December 1978), pp. 23–7.

49 Hess 1950a, p. 34. The ensuing quotation is also from this source.

50 Hess 1950b, p. 48. For a short, but very illuminating look at Barnett Newman's aesthetic, see Kuspit 1974, pp. 52–3.



It is a more funny and witty review – highly ironic if unpoetic – than Hess had previously written. The allusion to the ‘homespun’ character of Newman’s aesthetics of the sublime – in fact derived from a grandiose European tradition which had nevertheless become intellectually passé, hence provincial – subtly undermines it. Moreover, Hess’s reference to Newman as an aesthetician was ironical, in view of Newman’s well-known low opinion of aestheticians. He recognised that Newman, who was sometimes profound, but more often clever, sought to give art an ahistorical, ontological basis – an effort for which many aestheticians have been justifiably refuted. Thus, Newman’s belief that aesthetics is to artists as ornithology is to birds was misinformed, because Newman showed a greater awareness of aesthetics than a bird had ever had of ornithology. By seeking to locate art beyond the cavils of aesthetics Newman’s conception of the sublime also attempted, implausibly, to put his art outside the historical process. Not surprisingly, this desire for theoretical, cultural, and formal simplicity – all of which were viewed ‘unsynthetically’ – was hardly the type of art which Hess would have extensively admired. Fortunately, however, with regard to Newman, Hess later expanded his critical approach so that he authored two very informative monographs on him. Nonetheless, here as elsewhere, Hess mistakenly elevated a recognisable flaw in the art into a flawless recognition of the art.

## II

It is noteworthy that Hess’s criticism was most profound and poetic when it was most impassioned. At his best, Hess corroborated Baudelaire’s position that, ‘To be just, that is to say, to justify its existence, criticism should be partial, passionate and political, that is to say, written from an exclusive point of view, but a point of view that opens up the widest horizons.’<sup>51</sup> By writing *engagé* criticism when the period ethos called for ‘authenticity’ and ‘commitment’, Hess did more than express strong views in emotional terms. He realised deeply intellectual ‘prejudices’ of the era while he wrote about its most distinctive artists. In the ‘deepest Sartre sense’<sup>52</sup> is how Hess described what he considered the unprecedented economic deprivations faced by the Abstract Expressionists, using prose that would now seem lugubrious and irrelevant. In a sense, New York became, for those alienated artists, a symbol of the post-war world, for as

51 Baudelaire 1965 [1846], p. 44.

52 Hess 1950c, p. 23.

Sartre had stated it was the world's harshest city, a place where you never lose your way, but are always lost. Hess was not only sensitive to this historical situation, but he was able to recognise some of the major artists who expressed what de Kooning referred to as an existential mood.<sup>53</sup> An excellent example of Hess's fervid criticism was the extra-aesthetic significance he saw in gestural abstraction. When writing about the work of de Kooning, Pollock and Gorky (*Art News*, February 1951), he stated that in it 'Human gesture becomes a new subject and a new means'.<sup>54</sup> For this reason, Abstract Expressionism was not only a new artistic style, it was also 'a new interpretation of nature and of man'.<sup>55</sup> A passage by Rainer Maria Rilke vindicates Hess's contention: 'As someone who seeks for an object for a long time becomes more and more helpless, confused, and hasty, and finally creates a disorder in an accumulation of things about him, so the gestures of mankind which cannot find reason for existence, here become more and more impatient, nervous and hurried'.<sup>56</sup>

Understandably, Hess chose to deal with this tense and paradoxical art by means of a dialectical approach. The efficacy of Hess's 'critique-poésie' can be attributed to his recognition that dialectic was not, as Hegel had contended, a metaphysical schema. Rather he understood dialectic as an expendable tool that could disclose complex dimensions of art, though not necessarily its 'essence'. Hess's post-Hegelian view was in keeping with what Kierkegaard first understood: the dialectical concept is valid only when it relates directly to concrete experience. Thus, Hess spoke for himself as well as de Kooning when he used a remark by Nietzsche as an epigraph for his first book about the artist: 'The will to a system is a lack of integrity'.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Hess's admiration of de Kooning's art, which 'became a kind of programless program', can be seen as relating to his desire for a dialectic without preconceptions. By opening up an extraordinary range of perspectives into de Kooning's art through an experiential use of dialectic, Hess more than justified his critical method.

Since, however, a dialectical situation is emphatic to the extent that it fuses distinctly antithetical extremes, a dialectic is obviously less present where elements are dominant or ancillary rather than synthesised. Thus a dialectical approach is very susceptible to abuse if it becomes a standard of artistic excellence instead of a descriptive means to locate art contextually. Unfortunately, Hess sometimes failed to recognise that the most self-consciously synthetic

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53 Sandler, p. 98.

54 Hess 1951d, pp. 38–9.

55 Hess 1951a, p. 157.

56 Rilke 1933, pp. 46–7.

57 Hess 1959, p. 7.

art was not *necessarily* the most significant or historically pertinent. When Hess used the dialectic as a standard for success, as in the case of the colour-field abstractionists, it transcended the experience out of which it was purportedly growing. The result was a crypto-Hegelian hypostatizing that betrayed Hess's historical approach. In fact, Hess realised this inadequacy and sometimes lapsed into an eviscerated formalism. In dealing with Motherwell's art, for example, Hess frequently used the bland words 'elegant' and 'beautiful',<sup>58</sup> in spite of his apparent belief in other reviews, that 'beauty' – formal harmony not charged with synthetic tension – was dangerously close to being undialectical. Doubtlessly Hess knew what Valéry had earlier stated: 'In our time beauty is a corpse'.

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58 For example, see Hess 1952, pp. 45–6.

## John Berger as Art Critic

To understand the need for leftist art critics like John Berger, as well as the reason he is unusual, it is important to recognise the way art criticism embodies and is disembodied by the contradictions of modern society. At present, art criticism has regressed to a species of empiricism which hardly does more than give tautologic descriptions of art forms, just as avant-garde art has become appropriated by a system that now needs art to remain anarchistically apart. Since it is assumed that description can be neutral, a basic presupposition is always that, in carefully describing the art *object*, the critic has somehow 'objectively' explained it – a presupposition which results in self-serving pronouncements about 'taste' and 'quality' that ironically bear witness to the social pretensions of those who make them. Art criticism has become an exercise in positivism which, because it treats art as distinct from all other 'empirical' disciplines, has misconstrued the fragmented character of avant-garde art – its rejection of unity in the present but not necessarily in the future – to be proof of how art is always outside any system.

As practised today by Clement Greenberg, Hilton Kramer, and numerous others, art criticism is guilty of a clarity that obscures. It acknowledges only what is physically observable. As such, contemporary criticism never escapes the early Lukács's critique of scientism, which showed that the empirical method, so effective in studying nature, had become an 'ideological weapon' of the status quo when applied to social products. This usage characterises art criticism at present, because most critics erroneously assume that the concrete can be isolated in empirical facts of history, without realising that concrete particulars are inextricably connected to the social process as a whole. By using an empirical description of the art object rather than a concrete analysis which necessarily goes beyond the object to the process which both brings it into being and propels it into the present, most art critics reify the subjective act of creation, the potentially emancipatory aspects of art, and the nonsublimated manifestations of eros in art. Conventional art criticism seals the art object off from the act of conceiving it, only to conclude with a few numinous remarks about the ineffable greatness of art – something which cannot be empirically verified, only 'understood'.

A refreshingly incisive alternative to the sterility of contemporary criticism can be found in *About Looking*, Berger's seventh book about art. Consisting of twenty-three articles written over the last decade about specific artists, and

general aesthetic issues, this collection also includes a few essays about such topics as our changing social perception of animals. Thus, Berger not only elucidates the art discussed by means of extra-aesthetic factors – though never to the exclusion of aesthetic considerations – he also expands the format of his book to negate the formalist segregation of art. Influenced in this respect by Max Raphael, Berger continually shows how a work of art is a storehouse of creative energies awaiting realisation, not an ‘essential’ object needing only to be recognised. In approaching the art directly, he continually goes from the work *per se* to the creative process it contains and the social possibilities it reveals. Like Raphael, Berger contends that the revolutionary meaning of a work does not reside in any intrinsic subject or form, but in the critical consummation of a ‘meaning continually awaiting discovery and release’. In developing this view, Berger is careful to differentiate Raphael’s ‘world of values’ in art, with their accent on fostering transcendence through history, from the idealist view of art as a repository of transcendent ahistorical values. In contradistinction to the idealist, Berger considers art to be important insofar as it is continually timely, not because it is supposedly timeless.

Berger’s notion of the variegated implications of art is related to his awareness that the perceptual field is dense and open-ended, that we never see one thing, but always things in relation to each other and ourselves. Similarly, Berger posits and demonstrates that there is no a-social perception of art, since the very act of seeing is socially acquired, though not necessarily socially determined. He avoids the restricted perceptual mode of empiricism (or more specifically epistemological realism) which has been subjected to devastating critiques by Merleau-Ponty as well as Gestalt psychology, and goes from an awareness of the contextuality of perception to grounding art socially. In elucidating the social context of art, however, Berger acknowledges that art is not reducible to it, except by means of a vulgar materialism which insidiously ‘purifies’ the perception of art anew. Like Adorno rather than Goldmann, Berger approaches the concreteness of art systematically, yet not for the sake of any closed system to circumscribe the concrete. He shows that important art has the potential to change attitudes and to challenge the critical spirit precisely because it is a superstructural phenomenon that is not just a transparent reflection of society’s substructure.

‘The Suit and the Photograph’, perhaps his most penetrating essay on photography in *About Looking*, couples an admirable sensitivity to the works with a critical rigour that expands them. He focuses on three photographs – one showing peasants going to a dance (1913), one showing peasants in a dance band (1914) and one showing four protestant missionaries (1931) – all by the German artist August Sander, whose aim was a comprehensive photographic biography

entitled 'Man of the Twentieth Century'. Taking his cue from Walter Benjamin, who in 1931 said that Sander's work was so intimately specific that it thereby became theory, Berger discusses how the photos, which at first appear so similar, reveal subtle things about the 'expressionless' men they show.

In observing that the social status of each group of men is intimated by the fit of the suits and the posture in which they are worn, Berger notes that the European suit developed circa 1865 was the first ruling class costume to idealise purely sedentary power, that the peasants (who could hardly have afforded such suits much earlier than the first photograph) were accustomed to other clothes. For the middle class men photographed, the suit was ordinary attire, for the peasants it was not. Thus, the physical contradiction of bodies shaped by vigorous effort and clothes designed to idealise inactivity results, as Berger notes, in 'what Gramsci called class hegemony'.<sup>1</sup> The very acceptance of these clothes condemned the peasants to looking clumsy and socially incongruous, hence 'innately' inferior.

To appreciate the unorthodoxy of Berger's perspective, we need only compare his approach to the Sander photographs with that of a self-styled 'Marxist' art critic who, however controversial, remains a prisoner of positivism. When writing about these photographs a few months ago, Max Kozloff stated that Sander was quixotic to propose that he could account for a social environment merely by documenting those who composed it.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Kozloff makes the commonplace argument that Sander's photographs are significant because they convey a 'chilly, alienating mood', with the historical value of the work being its 'miraculous equilibrium' of the 'sentimental and the abrasive'. Thus, Kozloff never goes beyond particular observations about the works, yet he simultaneously makes general claims for them by detecting alienation then failing to locate it. Fearing theoretical dogmatism, he arrives at an audacious, but otherwise impotent, empiricism. Consequently, the tension in his critical response really results from an uncertainty about his own position, which leads us to expect more than the formalist disengagement he never really escapes.

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1 Berger 1980, p. 33.

2 Kozloff 1980, pp. 76–7. While he was executive editor of *Artforum* in 1975, Kozloff became involved in a heated controversy because he argued that 'there is no escape from ideology, either in the creating or interpreting of art'. In response to Kozloff's position, the New York dealers and galleries financially supporting *Artforum* pressured the publisher of the magazine into firing Kozloff and editor John Coplans. Furthermore, Kozloff and Coplans were stridently attacked in the New York press. See, for example, Hilton Kramer's hysterical response, 'Muddled Marxism Replaces Criticism at Artforum', *The New York Times*, December 21, 1975.

In two essays from *About Looking*, 'Giacometti' and 'Francis Bacon and Walt Disney', Berger deals with the antithetical ways alienation is used and with the necessity of grounding alienation contextually in order to divulge its divergent social consequences. On Giacometti, Berger concludes that no other artist's work could have been so changed and enhanced by his death: 'It is as though his death confirms his work'.<sup>3</sup> While he lived, Giacometti's feeling of alienation, his view that everyone was doomed to separateness, was deftly expressed by his sculpted figures which are physically so attenuated and 'sketchily' surfaced that they appear forever distant, and in a sense unknowable. As Sartre, who was a friend of Giacometti's, noted, these works deal with untraversable distances, with people condemned to be forever apart yet always near, alone yet together (as in Giacometti's *City Square*).<sup>4</sup> In Sartre's evocative discussion of Giacometti's sculpture, however, alienation is continually defined in ontological, rather than social terms. Thus, social fragmentation is translated into a metaphysical condition which seems disassociated from the historical situation to which it is undeniably connected. Nonetheless, however inclined to ahistoricism Sartre's interpretation appears – and, unlike Camus, Sartre continually sought to reconcile *Angst* about the contingency of life with a desire to transcend the historically contingent repression of capitalism – there remains an important dimension of truth to this view when it is seen as a commentary on the absolute 'distance' of death. Berger aptly makes this connection in his essay, because as Marcuse and others have noted, a social revolution will not eliminate tragedy but transform it, so that we may confront mortality with a dignity unknown to the 'absurd' present. As such, Berger observes that the social isolation and manic individualism of Giacometti's art transcend the social despair which fostered them.

The expansiveness of Berger's critical response, his synthetic approach to the social and ontological aspects of alienation in Giacometti's art, makes his essay an important compliment to Adorno's position on this issue. Adorno, who admired Giacometti's work, contended that committed art gains in strength insofar as it attains autonomy by working on the level of attitudes, rather than on the plane of specific acts. He believed that committed art is superior to the one-dimensionality of tendentious art because its artistic autonomy makes it 'inherently ambiguous'. Adorno's disregard for intentionality, however, both on

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3 Berger 1980, p. 173.

4 Jean-Paul Sartre 1948. On Sartre's behalf, it should be noted that conventional art critics have denounced his seemingly a-social interpretation as 'more ideological than philosophic', because they have detected social radicalism in it. See Kramer 1973, p. 260.

the part of the artist and the critic, reinforces an untenably neo-Kantian notion of the art as 'essentially' meaningful and by implication a-contextual.<sup>5</sup> Adorno's faith in the political engagement of the autonomy makes him unduly optimistic about the standard critical perception of alienation in art. A frequent response by empirical critics to art addressing tragedy in general, rather than specifically tragic circumstances, is to say that it deals with the human condition *instead of* concrete social conditions. In proclaiming art autonomous, formalist critics have denied any political content to Giacometti's sculpture. In their view, aesthetic transcendence makes the art relevant to all history, yet specifically connected to no period. Adorno's argument for autonomy and against reification of art by politics, while simultaneously maintaining the politically emancipatory dimension of art, has been used in a different sense by formalists to launch facile attacks on any relation of art to politics. Nonetheless, the obvious failure of formalists like Hilton Kramer to write art criticism free of politics – they use the concept of autonomy politically to thwart attacks on the capitalist system – emphatically refutes their own concept of autonomous art. Conversely, Adorno's position on artistic autonomy is reconciled very effectively with a commitment to political radicalism, although his critical affirmation of autonomy is not without difficulties.

The aesthetic dimension which allows Giacometti's art to attack the present system rather than specific things in it, which in being resolved would merely leave the system unresolved, is also what allows formalists to move this art from being an assault on the system to a commentary on man's fate. Only the consummation by critics like Berger of *potentially* revolutionary meaning 'continually awaiting discovery and release' can save art from being politically domesticated. As such, the necessarily consummative role of criticism means that art is only semi-autonomous, not 'essentially' meaningful in any independent political sense. Adorno and Sartre have not really justified the autonomy of Giacometti's sculpture; they have only given incisive historical reasons for maintaining the concept of autonomy, rather than recognising art's semi-autonomy – its continuous need to be contextually re-grounded.

To express alienation in the most concrete terms, however, does not necessarily mean that art was conceived to project either ontological distance or social discontent. Berger's essay on the paintings of Francis Bacon makes this clear. As he notes, Bacon is an artist with a fully articulated world-view and considerable technical skill who, in 1971, was named the greatest living artist

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5 Adorno 1974, pp. 78–9: 'Sartre's question, why write?; and his solution of it in a "deeper choice", are invalid because the author's motivations are irrelevant to the finished work'.



by *Connaissance des Arts*. Berger shows that Bacon is one of those artists who, in rejecting everything including an alternative to what is, leaves everything as it is. Bacon's alienation is the type against which Brecht warned, an alienation from which one does not return. In Berger's view, Bacon's notion of the absurdity of things has nothing in common with the views of Beckett or Giacometti. While Beckett approaches despair as a result of questioning, Bacon questions nothing because he accepts the worst. As such, Bacon's figures feature wounds which are self-inflicted, a testimony to mankind's hopelessly self-destructive fate. Berger notes that the lack of any thematic development in Bacon's *oeuvre* both reflects his lack of alternative answers and results in the suave refinement for presenting 'the worst' which ironically makes it less credible. The conclusion of Berger's essay (which recalls George Orwell's equally devastating critique of Dali) is that Bacon's art does not address loneliness, anguish, or metaphysical doubt, but rather is alienation in its absolute form – a vacuous cynicism wallowing in conformity.

It should be added that the hopeless despair conveyed by Bacon's art would hardly be innocuous were most spectators not so content to be exonerated by this art from any meaningful opposition to the present situation. Here Bacon's intent to speak for all social history both conforms to the ahistoricism of his audience and testifies inadvertently to its impossibility by its easy recognition as a certain moment *in* art history. The real failing of Bacon's art is not so much that it is 'essentially' bad, but that it is very limited in precisely the way that engenders acceptance of its flaws. Bacon's paintings are powerful but very limited, with the limitations themselves ironically gaining in power from the artistic merits they ultimately overwhelm.

The multifacetedness of Berger's art criticism, his open-ended and self-reflexive approach to the concreteness of art, is fully in evidence in his excellent psychoanalytic analysis of Rodin's sculpture. 'Rodin and Sexual Domination' is related to Berger's famous, or rather notorious, BBC television series, *Ways of Seeing*, in which he explored in art the social roles of men and women. Written in 1967 during the festivities for the fiftieth anniversary of Rodin's death, which as Berger observed was to *consume* rather than to understand history, this essay disappropriates Rodin's art from conventional art criticism. He discusses the erotic compression and often fragmentation of Rodin's women figures, who frequently lack assertive 'completeness'. Even formalist critics are bothered by the feverish eroticism of much of Rodin's sculpture. One critic, Albert Elsen, has spoken of Rodin's 'surprising aggressiveness toward the model', but in praising this work he has explained it in purely formal terms as the 'logical' continuation of Rodin's belief 'that any view of the body was potentially of artistic interest and beauty. Against charges of obscenity and immorality, Rodin's defence was

his sincerity of observation as an artist'.<sup>6</sup> Another empirical critic, Sir Kenneth Clark, has spoken of Rodin as the greatest sculptor since Michelangelo, yet he has confessed that upon seeing Rodin's late drawings, 'this endless belt of sprawling women has a depressing rather than an exhilarating effect on me, and seems to reveal a kind of promiscuity which is foreign to the concentrated passions of the greatest artists'.<sup>7</sup>

Far from seeing this aspect of Rodin's sculpture as just a stylistic development or an inartistic flaw, Berger considers the heavily sexual character of these figures to be a motivating force for his art, though in more than the Freudian sense of sublimation. Berger argues that the contorted expressivity of these figures and the way they appear to be almost pushed back into the material of which they are made are connected to how Rodin (nicknamed 'the old satyr') related to women – an observation confirmed by contemporary accounts, such as the statement by Isodora Duncan that Rodin kneaded women's bodies like clay figures. In contradistinction to the Pygmalion myth, however, Berger states that Rodin did not wish to make either women or statues his equals, but to exercise dominance over them. Thus, the desire to dominate pervades his sculpture and drawings, 'because clay and flesh are so ambivalently and fatally related in his mind, he is forced to treat them as though they were a challenge to his own authority and potency'.<sup>8</sup>

Berger's excellent discussion stops short, however, when he concludes that Rodin's art is paradigmatic for the bourgeois sexual mores studied by Freud – on the one hand, the hypocritical repression which made sexual desire feeble and phantasmagoric; on the other, a fearful need to dominate the sexual drive and the women who stimulated it. While Rodin's art does show that he reflected this social contradiction, it also reveals that he did not entirely accept it. The 'bourgeois' response to this contradiction would have been a refusal to see it or a nervous contention that it really involved an ahistorical conflict between civilisation and instinct. Rodin's aggressive ambivalence toward contemporary culture can be seen in the way he defied it aesthetically, thus causing considerable scandal. Concerning the fluctuating surface of Rodin's sculpture, its explicitly hand imprinted look that fosters temporality, not 'time-

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6 Elsen 1971, p. 21. Elsen is considered the world's expert on Rodin.

7 Clark, 1973, p. 344. It should be noted that this book was partly financed by Sotheby Parke Bernet, one of the leading art auction corporations in the world. Last year alone, the New York branch of Sotheby cleared \$90.4 million in sales. As Rita Reif notes, '[a]rt is becoming, even more than before, a commodity'. See Reif 1980, p. 26.

8 Berger 1980, p. 183.

lessness', Rainer Maria-Rilke (Rodin's one-time secretary) wrote: 'the gestures of mankind that cannot find reason for existence have become more and more impatient, nervous, and hurried';<sup>9</sup> Rodin viewed himself as a dissident; he condemned the placid official art as a result of bourgeois patrons and 'rich bourgeois salons';<sup>10</sup> and he was seen by contemporaries as one whose art epitomised the malaise and alienation of the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, while Rodin frequently showed women in ignominious poses, he also showed men in humbled, fragmented, and contorted positions. In fact, Rodin's major work, the *Gates of Hell* (1880–1917), is peopled almost entirely with powerfully expressive male nudes. There can be little doubt that Rodin, who was not religious, selected the subject of Dante's *Inferno*, because the suffering of rebels against ethical codes was something with which he could identify both consciously and unconsciously.<sup>11</sup> Rodin's sculpture justifies Marcuse's observation that eros in art both serves and subverts the established order by calling into question the dominant reality principle.<sup>12</sup> In this case and in others, eros challenges the social system to distinguish between 'the real' and 'the possible'. The return of the repressed in Rodin's art shows that the history of male domination is also the history of the repression of males in order to preserve the social hierarchy. Rodin's sculpture does not merely question what is, it also intimates the possibility of something else – another reason, another sensibility. Thus, Rodin's work completely demonstrates the incisiveness of Marcuse's contention that, compared to the one-dimensionality of propaganda, art is permeated with an affirmation which is often intertwined with pessimism and negation.

When Lenin denounced the historical sin of 'Tolstoyism', he was referring to the way Tolstoy's criticism of political oppression was undermined by his own homilies on submission.<sup>13</sup> There is, however, another aspect of Tolstoyism that Lenin did not mention, namely, Tolstoy's idealisation of the oppressed and the way this led from commiseration with their history to an ahistorical adulation. By considering the peasants *categorically* superior to their oppressors, Tolstoy indirectly praised the educational deprivations responsible for their 'natural' simplicity. He failed to recognise that their virtues were systematically forced upon them by a social order that denied them intellectual sophistication. Far

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9 Rilke 1933 [1919], p. 36.

10 Claris 1902, p. 32.

11 Elsen 1960, p. 56. Even though Elsen's book is checked by positivism, it is nevertheless a good discussion of Rodin's doubts and disaffections. It is easily Elsen's best.

12 Marcuse 1979.

13 Lenin 1963, pp. 51–3.

from being concerned with changing their plight, Tolstoy became increasingly pacific about altering people whom he loved as they were. In this particular sense, Tolstoyism is a frequent and very insidious problem for the left, especially concerning the arts, with Lenin himself being an ironic example of one who confused pre-revolutionary artistic developments with post-revolutionary possibilities in art. One of the most common manifestations of aesthetic Tolstoyism is the view of many orthodox Marxists that low art (whether folk art, 'proletarian' art, or primitive art) is the *intrinsic* art of the people, as if a social revolution would only change things materially, not aesthetically or intellectually. Even when low art is used in a revolutionary society (as in Chile under Allende), it cannot be seen the same way because of the self-conscious social transformation it entails. In the present scheme of things, however, low art can only be viewed with an ambivalence which couples admiration of its spontaneity and native strength with a disdain for the social failings conveyed by the narrowness and naivety of its aesthetic limitations.

Berger does not really idealise the lower classes, however much he works on their behalf, yet his essays on the paintings of Millet and on primitive art are not entirely free of aesthetic Tolstoyism. In 'Millet and the Peasant', Berger discusses Millet's use of a new subject, the harshness of peasant labour, to force an old language to speak of what it had ignored. While Millet was, according to Berger, too pessimistic to allow strong political convictions, he was supposedly moved to side with democracy by the events of 1848. From 1847, Millet devoted the remaining 27 years of his life to exploring the living conditions of the French peasantry. His choice of subject matter was sometimes nostalgic, but Berger argues it was because Millet saw progress as a threat to human dignity and because he foresaw the subjection of the peasant to the industrial market as a 'loss' of history. But as Berger notes, the acceptance of Millet has been paradoxical. Easily one of the most well-known artists in history, Millet did three works, *The Sower*, *The Gleaners*, and *The Angelus*, which are known by every peasant family in France. *The Sower* has become both a trademark of a U.S. bank and a symbol of revolution in Beijing and China, as well as a favourite of some American millionaires who wish to believe life is 'simple and free'. This disturbing appropriation of a potentially revolutionary picture is seen by Berger as a result of Millet's failing – a failing which occurred when 'the language of traditional painting could not accommodate the subject he brought with him'.<sup>14</sup>

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14 Berger 1980, p. 76.

There can be little doubt that Millet's art, which was innovative both formally and thematically, has a potentially revolutionary dimension. *The Winnower* (1848) and *The Sower* (1850) were seen as seditious because of the looseness of their brushwork, as well as because of their focus on the harshness, even brutality of peasant life. Some of the nineteenth-century critics who responded to the work emphasised its political import: Gautier said of *The Winnower* that it has 'everything it takes to horrify the bourgeois'; Dumas complained that Millet's wood cutter was 'not the peasant of 1660, but the proletarian of 1859'; and a critic on the left praised Millet's 'ingenious savagery'.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Millet's work was not seen in overtly social terms by the majority of nineteenth-century critics. The reason for the pastoral interpretation of Millet's pictures (as opposed to the consistently political reading elicited by Courbet's work) was his poetic view of nature along with the rustic, even biblical character of his peasants. As Rochéry, a contemporary critic noted, Millet was 'a true lover of country life and of country people' or, as Van Gogh later stated, Millet's people seem to be one with the very earth they till. All of these impressions of Millet's work show that the golden glaze and edifying tone of most of his pictures conciliate, rather than confront, the viewer. Consequently, conservatives like Sir Kenneth Clark can state, as he did on BBC television, that Millet was right to consider himself a-political, because 'The patient resignation of his workers, and the feeling that they are part of an unchangeable order of things, speaks exactly the opposite message to that of Marxism'.

Millet admired the working classes without caring to change them; hence the quasi-biblical stature he gave them; hence his letter to the leftist art critic Thoré-Burger that he wanted to show peasants doing their 'work good-naturedly and simply' as a 'habit' for life; hence the objection by Pissarro and Baudelaire that the peasants were too 'priestly'. It is not surprising that Tolstoy himself considered Millet to be one of the greatest painters ever, because Millet supposedly promoted universal brotherhood by 'depicting hard-working peasants with respect and love'.<sup>16</sup> Tolstoy's view cannot be reconciled with Millet's public attack on Courbet's leftist politics or with Millet's glee over the suppression of the Paris Commune. To Millet, the lower classes were charming insofar as they were poetically *distant*.

Nevertheless, T.J. Clark was right to state that Millet's peasant was not only the farmer of Virgil's *Georgics*, but also the proletarian of 1860.<sup>17</sup> Only simplistic

15 For an excellent discussion of the political response to Millet's paintings, see Clark 1973.

16 Tolstoy 1969, pp. 243–65.

17 Clark 1973, p. 98.

critics could maintain that Millet's pictures are 'essentially' reactionary, that Berger is completely wrong. Insofar as Millet even painted people who did not exist politically, according to French society, he forced an issue into public view that was carefully ignored. As Thoré-Burger once noted, the very people forced to the margins of culture became embarrassingly central to its art. Intentionally or otherwise, Millet made this contradiction a significant part of his work. Millet himself, perhaps experiencing momentary guilt about his own insensitivity, did sometimes strip the Arcadian glaze from his paintings. In *The Sower* and *The Winnower*, for example, Millet induced political responses by depicting the peasants with such 'ingenious savagery' that viewers had to take a stand for or against their social situation. In these cases, the middle road of Tolstoyism was usually denied.

The sensitive yet narrow view Berger develops of Millet's art is connected to a critical shortcoming in his essay 'The Primitive and the Professional'. He observes that the use of the word 'primitive' is applied to Western European art prior to that of Raphael, to art 'curiosities' from the third-world colonies, and to working-class artists who did not become *professional*. For the ruling classes, 'professional' art is the main European tradition – a tradition not defined until the seventeenth century. Berger considers the primitive to be a craftsman, rather than a fine artist, while he considers the professional to be a former craftsman who has emigrated to the ruling class. According to this view, the professional becomes skilled in a certain set of conventions which supposedly reflect 'eternal truths' to the ruling classes, while being mere social conventions to the classes being ruled.

The tendency of avant-garde artists to use primitive styles is interpreted by Berger as a political act to express the experience of other classes. In considering Ford Madox Brown's *Work* (Manchester Art Gallery), Berger argues that the conventions with which he approached his subject pre-empted the possibility of depicting manual work convincingly. The first 'serious' artists to be primitives appeared in the nineteenth century. Many were *bohemians* who, in Berger's opinion, defied normal class divisions to suggest that art could come from any class. Artists like Douanier Rousseau and Facteur Cheval were designated by names common to other professions (the customs and postal services), characterised as Sunday painters, and treated as cultural 'sports', because they did not undergo a class transformation, thus becoming 'professional'. These primitives were distinctly unlike amateurs, who, being members of the cultured classes, merely followed professionals with less rigour. The clumsiness of primitive art is, according to Berger, the precondition of its eloquence because what it says was not meant (by the upper classes) to be said. The equivocation among 'serious' artists between primitive art and professional art has supposedly led

to a dead end. The impasse of formalism today represents in Berger's view 'the original problematic of professional art: an art in reality concerned with a selective, very reduced art of experience, which nevertheless claims to be universal'.<sup>18</sup>

Berger's account of primitive art is flawed less by Tolstoyism, than by a type of reductionism which all too often undermines the acute perceptions of Claude Lévi-Strauss. This connection is revealing, since in another essay Berger quotes from *The Savage Mind*, where Lévi-Strauss distinguishes between professional art and primitive art.<sup>19</sup> According to Lévi-Strauss, academic art internalises the execution (the signifier) and externalises the occasion (the signified), while primitive art internalises the occasion and externalises the execution.<sup>20</sup> This implausibly reductive summary, like others by Lévi-Strauss, is based on an overuse which becomes misuse of Saussure's linguistic terminology (which, in presenting a relational view of language, combatted the old substantive notion of language as discrete units of 'essential' meaning). Furthermore, as Annette Michelson has shown, Lévi-Strauss's highly reactionary approach to modern art results as much from his a priori assumption that art can be dealt with conclusively by means of a linguistic model, as from his belief in the ahistorical superiority of harmonious Renaissance art.<sup>21</sup> Lacking almost any historical grounding, Lévi-Strauss's categories of professional and primitive not only fail to deal with the concrete particulars of what falls within them, they also overlook 'hybrid' developments such as the neo-primitivism of the avant-garde which, as Roland Barthes and others have shown, can hardly be restricted to an 'essential' one-to-one relation of signifier and signified. Lévi-Strauss's aphoristic style at first seems connected to Nietzsche's epigrammatic manner, yet it is really antithetical to it. While Nietzsche contended that to avoid intellectual crudity one must make distinctions continuously, Lévi-Strauss tries to make distinctions that are continuous.

Like Lévi-Strauss, Berger is concerned with appreciating cultural achievements outside the West. From a notable concern to understand primitive art, however, Berger proceeds to a conception of primitive art as the inverse of pro-

18 Berger 1980, p. 67.

19 See 'Why Look at Animals?' in Berger 1980, p. 2. In this case, as in *Ways of Seeing*, for example, Berger uses Lévi-Strauss' observations to very good effect (Berger 1975a, p. 86).

20 Lévi-Strauss 1970, p. 29. One of the many untenable remarks he makes about art is that '[a]ll miniatures seem to have intrinsic aesthetic quality ... The paintings of the Sistine Ceiling are a small-scale model in spite of their imposing dimensions' (p. 23).

21 Annette Michelson's essay 'Art and the Structuralist Perspective' was published in Fry 1970, p. 51.

fessional art (precisely what Lévi-Strauss has contended). Primitive art starts as an inversion of professional art and then becomes a subversion of it; it goes from being a supposed expression of the repressed to the means whereby repression is ended.<sup>22</sup> Berger's simplified approach to this issue is simultaneously too broad to deal with the historical developments of crafts or primitive art and too narrow to understand why these developments do not merely exist in a dichotomous or oppositional relation to the fine arts. The issue of craft versus fine art, for example, is hardly a matter of one being lower class, the other upper class. A revealing example can be found in the Rococo period when, as in most other periods, the ruling class commissioned both craftsmen and 'professional' artists to decorate their salons. A major distinction between crafts and the 'professional' arts goes back to the Renaissance and the inception of modern capitalism (with its concomitant ideas of specialisation), when a distinction was first made between artists who used a theoretical approach to expand the conventions of craftsmanship, as opposed to artisans who worked more within the conventions established by guilds. Rightly or wrongly, the difference between fine artist (or 'professional') and craftsman (also a professional) was based on the specific art form being used, namely, whether it was a 'decorative' art (furniture, porcelain, tapestries, etc.) used to some extent by all classes or a fine art (painting, sculpture) commissioned almost exclusively by the ruling classes. The degree of technical mastery of the craftsman, more than the set of conventions used, determined whether or not he served the ruling classes.

Conversely, the period style of the 'professional' arts did not merely serve one class. As Arnold Hauser has shown, for example, the Rococo style in pre-

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22 A related example can be found in the way Lévi-Strauss starts out with a critique of the 'sterile empiricism' of the West, yet ends up acclaiming totemic or magical thinking, which he says uses bricolage, 'a science of the concrete'. From this simplistic contrast he goes on to say that the 'real principle of dialectical reason' is to be found in the way the 'savage mind totalises' (Lévi-Strauss 1970, p. 245). Needless to say, this view is implausible as much for its retrograde notion of the dialectic as for the way he superficially transposes divergent cognitive modes from one culture to the next. Lévi-Strauss's concept of dialectical thinking overlooks the degree of self-consciousness it entails (as Adorno noted, dialectical thinking is the effort to be both conscious and self-conscious, to consider your critical approach as you use it to consider something else), which is unrelated to the empathetic character of totemic thought. Lévi-Strauss recognises that totemic thought is not bound by empiricism, yet he infers that because it is different it is superior. He shows no awareness that, unlike totemic thought, dialectical thinking historically transcends empiricism, because it assimilates it and then goes on to show its inadequacies – something magical, hence ahistorical, totemic thinking can hardly claim.



revolutionary France was a fusion of aristocratic elegance and bourgeois intimacy which expressed a subtle dissolution of the established order<sup>23</sup> (although in Bavaria, as in *Die Wies Kirche* or in *Asamkirche*, the Rococo style helped entrench a Catholicism which was endorsed by *all* classes). Furthermore, the most important artist of the French Revolution, Jacques Louis David, did not reject 'professional' art, but radicalised it from within. As such, his paintings were recognised by all classes as a focal point of the left. While David did execute a number of broadsheets in a propagandistic vein known to the lower classes, his most effective, and certainly most radical, creations were his 'professional' paintings – paintings which disappropriated the fine arts from the upper classes, however short term his achievement.

Berger's discussion of 'primitive' art in the nineteenth century is also attenuated by a belief in class 'purity'. Many painters like Henri Rousseau did not intend to confront official art with an alternative lower class art. Rather, the educational deprivations that Rousseau suffered as a member of the lower classes were responsible, in part, for his inability to become a 'professional' painter, although he apparently wished to achieve official recognition. Thus, the pristine character of his art, which saves it from the hackneyed formulas of contemporary Academicism, results in a more humanised and expressive painting, but only because Rousseau was *unable* to assimilate Academic conventions. Like the peasants photographed by Sander, Rousseau was a victim of class hegemony even though the consequence of this dominance helped produce an art which, because of its emotional directness and formal uniqueness, greatly excels contemporary upper class art. To merely consider Rousseau's art subversive because it is not 'professional' is to overestimate the *intentional* political import of his art. Nor could it be said that the rebuttal to an intellectual hegemony purporting to be aesthetically objective is to be located solely in an art of enhanced subjectivity and spontaneity. Precisely because it circumvents as well as confronts the class hegemony of 'professional' art, 'primitive' art is not completely free of concessions to historically contingent aesthetic limits – limits which cannot be transcended by indirection.

Concerning the neo-primitivism of the avant-garde, Berger's position is also much too narrow. Artists like Courbet and Gauguin did not merely use primitivism to express the experience of other classes, since their art really synthesised

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23 Hauser 1951, pp. 1–37. Also, Hauser argues that the emergence of the modern middle class 'put an end to the idea of style as something consciously and deliberately held in common by a cultural community'.

the historical self-consciousness of high art with the emotional immediacy of low art, the 'professional' with the 'primitive', to produce a fragmented art that was nevertheless more whole than completely harmonious Academicism. Bohemians and avant-garde artists were interested in primitivism for several reasons: as a means of arriving at a pristine cultural situation out of which they felt society would be created anew; as an approach, contemporary with Freud, to the instinctual sexual drives more openly acknowledged by many non-Western societies; as a means of negating the dehumanising urbanity of Academic art, with its emphasis on slick technical virtuosity and tensionless 'beauty'; and as a nihilistic gesture (as in the case of much Dadaist anti-art) which was intended less as a means of revitalising Western art, than as a way of destroying it. The issue was never one of an 'essentially' revolutionary primitive art versus an intrinsically reactionary professional art, as if primitive art were a-contextually significant.

Berger's criticism is most expansive when he deals with particular artists, rather than general issues, in spite of the fact that he relates specific artists to broad social developments extremely well. The strength of Berger's art criticism is his perceptual acuity coupled with his ability to go beyond localised perceptions. The way Berger deals with particular artists is important because of the concrete grounding he achieves – a concrete grounding unknown to orthodox Marxists. Nicos Hadjinicolaou's dismissal of any psychoanalytic or psychological approach in favour of a monolithic 'class' interpretation, is based on the hardly plausible view that 'one cannot use a problematic centered on the analysis of individuals as a means of interpreting history, this is to falsify the nature of history'.<sup>24</sup> Not only does he engage in a narrow a priorism concerning the 'nature' of history and the individual's 'necessary' relation to it. Hadjinicolaou defines art in terms of class ideology even as he denies the artist self-consciousness about intentionality. His only recourse, as is the case with other orthodox Marxists, is to the *deus ex machina* of historical determinism paraded as 'scientific' criticism. Thus, in contradistinction to Berger, 'scientific' Marxists are merely the reverse of conventional empiricists. Both reify art by denying subjectivity in any open-ended sense; one constricts concrete experience to what can supposedly be known about history prior to it, the other restricts concrete experience to what can purportedly be known about it aside from history. John Berger shows the inadequacies of both approaches, however,

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24 Hadjinicolaou 1978, p. 20. An even more extreme faith in historically determined action can be found in Roger Garaudy's statement that 'Cézanne realised already that to watch was to act'. See his 'Budapest Interview' (1966), in Baxandall 1972, p. 208.

since he seldom reduces art to a reflection of history, or reduces history to a backdrop for art. By reaffirming the richness of experience, Berger deftly illuminates the revolutionary potential in art and in our present situation – a situation we have not completely chosen, but in relation to which we must continually choose.

## Meyer Schapiro, Karl Korsch and the Emergence of Critical Theory

It isn't [a] question between us whether we should support a closed, final irreversible system or consistent, orderly examination of [isolated] problems ... The speculative form may be more systematic and closed ... the systematic form more open, experimental, inventive, rich in discovery. Marxism is not a closed system or complete science ... The superiority of M. [Marx] to P. [Proudhon] appears in the more coherent principles and in [the] better experience of social life ... It is true that P. [Proudhon] is less systematic but his unsystematic character is less open.<sup>1</sup>

MEYER SCHAPIRO (1943–4)



Intellectual advances have always consisted of making distinctions, rather than in suppressing them, and some ways of distinguishing differences are clearly more incisive than others. A revealing case involves the basic distinction observed by D'Alembert between *esprit systématique* and *esprit de système*<sup>2</sup> – a distinction that helps illuminate much about the critical achievement of Meyer Schapiro. The French *philosophe* identified here the subtle yet profound opposition between thinking *systematically* (which entails an on-going, self-critical qualification of one's conceptual framework, along with the ideological values presupposed by it, as concrete events are analysed anew) and thinking

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- 1 Meyer Schapiro, 'Ten Theses for a Public Discussion with Nicola Chiaromonte in 1943/44', pp. 1–2, Folder #37, The Personal Papers of Meyer Schapiro, New York City. These 40 folders of unpublished material consist of outlines and notes for public lectures as well as public debates, in addition to numerous short critiques of articles by other authors. Folder #37, entitled 'Marxism: 1930–1950s', for example, contains two very insightful discussions, a single page each, by Schapiro of Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875). One of these discussions was written in 1933 and the other was written in 1957/58.
  - 2 For a discussion of this distinction by D'Alembert in his 'Preliminary Discourse' to the *Encyclopédie*, see: Cassirer, 1951, p. 8.

*for the sake of a system* (which encompasses numerous, often antagonistic, forms of streamlined 'concrete' analysis, whether of the innocently idealist or positivist varieties, or of the more sober orthodox Marxist type, the latter of which is a frequent prescription for economic reductionism).

As a practitioner of thinking systematically, but not of thinking within a circumscribed system, Meyer Schapiro has used throughout his entire career an empirically precise (but *not* empiricist) form of critical thinking concomitant with a broad-ranging historical materialism that is focused on the dynamic interplay of engaged opposites, on the shifting enlacement of elements in an interlocking, yet dynamic field. A notable feature of his critiques is how he always concedes both that the antithesis of historical forces is never fully resolved and that the perception of their interplay is necessarily projective as well as receptive, constitutive as well as passive, productive as well as reproductive. Here as elsewhere, then, Schapiro the dialectician constantly reminds us that the term 'dialectic' was introduced by Zeno of Elea in early fifth-century Greece, that this word for the highest form of logic (according to Plato in *The Republic*) had an organic connection both to 'dialogue' – the interchange of views, often dissimilar – and to 'dialect' – the specific language by means of which human exchanges are interrelated.<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, great artworks are usually, Schapiro observes, marked by problematic or even contradictory features, most often an incompleteness and inconsistency that attest to the 'contingencies of a prolonged effort'. Thus, the hegemonic concept of artistic harmony – 'the perfect correspondence of separable forms and meanings and the concept of their indistinguishability' – in fact harbours quite unjustifiably 'an ideal of perception which may be compared with a mystic's experience of the oneness of the world or of God'.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, Schapiro contends: 'Critical seeing, aware of the incompleteness of perception, is explorative and dwells on details as well as on the large aspects that we call the whole. It takes into account other's seeing; it is collective and cooperative'.<sup>5</sup>

Schapiro considers himself an 'unorthodox Marxist', yet he has invariably approached art in a way that is fundamentally at odds with the controlled reflectionism and epistemological realism of what is normally termed 'dialect-

3 In fact, Schapiro's admiration for Plato's particular use of dialectical thinking was expressed as follows in 1943/44: '[It is] wrong to say that little is left of Hegel ... his history, aesthetic, religion, phenomenology remain wonderful books, though I prefer Plato: we couldn't do without H [Hegel]' Meyer Schapiro, 'Ten Theses for a Public Discussion without Nicola Chiaromonte', p. 1 (Folder #37, The Personal Papers of Meyer Schapiro, New York City).

4 Schapiro 1966, p. 5 and p. 14.

5 Schapiro 1966, p. 15.

ical materialism'. Hence, Schapiro's distinctive deployment of Marxian concepts, which has been a constant if variegated aspect of his thought from the 1920s up to the 1990s, helps us to remember that Marx himself never referred to his own historically materialist method as the all-encompassing or absolute system called 'dialectical materialism', nor did he ever consider his critical project to be finalised. In fact, Marx's most significant statement of method, the 1857 Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, remained a programmatic fragment that was never even edited for publication.<sup>6</sup>

The phrase 'dialectical materialism' was after all coined by Plekhanov and then codified only later as a closed teleological system by such figures as Kautsky and Stalin,<sup>7</sup> who transformed Marx's probing and self-critical mode of historical inquiry into an ironclad and self-assured form of 'complete science' that reified dialectics into a purported 'law of nature', all of which not only imparted closure to the whole but also situated humanity in a relatively resigned, largely *non*-dialectical relation to a course of history subsequently deemed 'inevitable'. Nor were authoritarian political configurations in the Soviet Union merely a fortuitous consequence of an epistemological realism that in theory appealed to the 'truth' via 'objective conditions' that were considered to be independent of human agency and free of subjective mediation. In short, as Schapiro has always recognised, 'dialectical materialism' – as opposed to historical materialism – is a profoundly *non*-dialectical form of Marxism, with non-dialogical political overtones, however much it may have been one of the dominant applications of Marxism throughout the twentieth century.

In March 1942, Schapiro (along with several other intellectuals who considered themselves socialists, including Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell) was asked the following methodological question by Wolfgang Paalen, the editor of *Dyn*: 'Is Dialectical Materialism the science of a verifiable "dialectic" process: "[T]he science of the universal laws of motion and evolution in nature, human society and thought"?'<sup>8</sup> Schapiro's answer was a terse 'No', followed by a criticism of the questioner, whose 'badly framed' query was evidently

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6 Anderson 1976, p. 59. As Anderson has observed of Marx's legacy (and three-fourths of Marx's writings were not published in his lifetime): 'Fundamentally, Marx left behind him a coherent and developed economic theory of the capitalist mode of production, set out in *Capital*, but no comparable political theory of the structures of the bourgeois state, or the strategy and tactics of revolutionary socialist struggle by a working-class party for its overthrow ... [Furthermore] Marx never provided any extended general account of materialism as such' (p. 40).

7 McLellan 1976, p. 84.

8 Paalen 1942, pp. 49–52.

'not inspired by a primary concern with the theoretical and practical problems of socialism'.<sup>9</sup> Schapiro's independent and often original use of Marxian thought was eloquently outlined two years after this, around 1944, during a public discussion in which he defended the merits of both Marxism and socialism. In this forum, he voiced the above noted view that, contrary to what both anti-Marxists *and* orthodox Marxists believed (now we would say both post-Marxists *and* vulgar Marxists as well as born-again positivists), the issue could not be reduced to 'whether we should support a closed final, irreversible system or consistent orderly examination of [isolated] problems'.<sup>10</sup> He then contended as follows:

Marxism is not a closed system or complete science ... It is true that the possession of a theory or doctrine may be an obstacle to growth ... But this is hardly the issue in criticizing Marx, Lenin, RL [Rosa Luxemburg], or LT [Leon Trotsky]; they were people who grew immensely in their lives, who frequently changed their views, who criticized all views in light of their ideals and the demands of practical situations ... We are dealing with socialist thought and action; and it is the ideas and examples of these people which help us to criticize and correct the defects of socialist practice and thinking, or we would not single them out for discussion. It seems to me one of the most significant signs of the Russian revolution that it was led by two men [i.e., Lenin and Trotsky] who had been political antagonists for almost fifteen years, and that they were more clear-sighted than the followers of either.<sup>11</sup>

Contrary to the orthodox view, then, Schapiro has always addressed art and society as multi-directional human constructions throughout history, rather than as predetermined essences that reflect some unfolding 'objective' process of history. This theoretical framework illuminates why Schapiro has always placed considerable emphasis on the concrete formal analysis of artworks and

9 Paalen 1942, p. 52. Elsewhere, Schapiro had stated this position at more length. See Schapiro 1940, pp. 471–4; Edmund Wilson, in *To Finland Station*, 'gives too great importance, I think, to beating the dead dog of formal dialectic and the religious conception of a personified History ... I have no desire to defend dialectical materialism. It includes valuable insights ... as well as pretentious constructions ... But the fact is that dialectic first became the official philosophy of the revolutionary movement under Lenin's leadership'.

10 Schapiro, 'Ten Theses for a Public Discussion with Nicola Chiaromonte in 1943/44', pp. 1–3 (Folder #37, The Personal Papers of Meyer Schapiro, New York City).

11 Ibid.

on the technical procedures of making art, that is, on the various ways that cultural forms are produced by means of human labour and on the formative role these artworks will exercise. Here one recalls the remark attributed to Bertolt Brecht – who met with Schapiro several times in the late 1940s<sup>12</sup> – namely, that art is a hammer not a mirror. The essentialist understanding of history sponsored by ‘dialectical materialism’ precludes any such emphasis on a dynamic and open-ended interchange between material conditions and the human effort to shape them – all of which actually entails a struggle that is both subjective *and* objective in nature.

In taking this position, Schapiro reminds us of one of the most significant intellectual advances in modern world history, namely, Marx’s emphasis on how the double nature of human development provides humanity with the possibility of overcoming the traditional dichotomy between society and nature. This disclosure by Marx was predicated on a grasp of the *constitutive* nature of humanity’s relationships, which in turn divulged the densely mediating and always mediated relationship of humanity and nature. As such, this intervention by Marx, meant that the original concept of ‘humanity making its own history’ was given a notable new twist to mean ‘humanity making itself’.<sup>13</sup>

In a recent interview, Schapiro reemphasised the double nature of truth by pointing out how it is both subjectively and objectively constructed. His observation went as follows:

What is a fact? According to most languages, it is a product of labour. Consider the word for fact in German, ‘*Tatsache*’ – which means ‘thing done’ – in French, ‘*fait*’ – which means ‘made’ – or even the Latin base for the English word ‘fact’ – which is the word ‘*factum*’ and is related to *manufacture*, which means ‘made by hand’ ... What is the truth? The truth is what is *made*. There is an important letter in this regard by the scientist Galileo to the painter Cigolo, in which Galileo spoke of the truth as a synthesis of the technique of the artisan plus the knowledge of the artist.<sup>14</sup>

A related point was made when Schapiro did a critique of *Art and Experience* (1934) by the philosopher John Dewey, a former professor of his for whom he

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12 Interview with Meyer Schapiro and Lillian Milgram by the author, New York City, 3 April 1993.

13 Williams 1977, p. 14 and p. 19.

14 Interview with Meyer Schapiro and Lillian Milgram by the author, New York City, 20 May 1993.



provided editorial assistance on this book. According to Schapiro, this treatise on aesthetic experience is justifiably famous, but it is marked by an unjustifiable tendency 'to treat humanity and art as extensions of nature, as products of nature, without dealing with how humanity *reshapes* and *remakes* itself'. This lack of emphasis 'on mediating nature, on humanity using craft and art to redefine itself is a problem with the book'.<sup>15</sup>

The precedent for Schapiro's own broad ranging yet also sharply focused method along these lines is located easily enough within classical Marxism, especially in the essays from Marx's and Engels's early period. One such exemplary critique, Engels's 1847 essay on Goethe for the *Deutsche Brüsseler Zeitung*, was translated and introduced by Meyer Schapiro for the September 1932 issue of *New Masses*. (Until now, Schapiro's role here has gone unrecognised because the translation and commentary were published unsigned. Nonetheless, Schapiro has recently confirmed that he was in fact the anonymous author responsible for this contribution.)<sup>16</sup> Significantly, 1932 was also the year that other momentous early writings by Marx and Engels, specifically their 1844 *Philosophical and Economic Manuscripts*, first resurfaced and precipitated a notable rethinking of Marxism that was at odds with the ascendant interpretation of Marxism then sponsored by Stalin.

Furthermore, 1931–2 was the period when Stalin first launched his campaign against the heterodox and 'revisionist' or 'proto-Trotskyist' Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg (a thinker that Schapiro has admired since the early 1930s) because of her forceful critique of Lenin's anti-democratic version of Marxism (at least in his *What Is To Be Done?*, although not necessarily in *State and Revolution*). One of her most perceptive essays, which has certainly gained in credibility since the events of 1989 and is best known under the title of *Marxism or Leninism?* (1904), ended with the observation that, 'Historically, the errors committed by a truly revolutionary movement are infinitely more fruitful than

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15 Interview with Meyer Schapiro and Lillian Milgram by the author, Rawsonville, Vermont, 15 July 1992. Elsewhere, Schapiro expanded as follows on the differences between a classical Marxist approach and a naturalist or pragmatist approach in Schapiro 1940, p. 478: 'The point at which Marxism differs crucially from modern naturalistic writing on value (including Dewey, whose recent little work, *Theory of Valuation*, far surpasses in clarity and sharpness anything in Marxist literature) is in the deeper recognition of the extent of the conflict of group interests and its bearing on the estimation for social change. (And this is precisely the issue that critics of Marxism evade ... the admitted irreconcilability of class interests for their own democratic programs.)'.

16 Interview with Meyer Schapiro and Lillian Milgram by the author, New York City, 22 May 1993.

the infallibility of the cleverest Central Committee'.<sup>17</sup> (The fact that he has often expressed admiration for the brilliant leadership and undeniable intellectual discipline of Lenin and Trotsky should not lead one to assume that Schapiro was either a Leninist or a Trotskyist, since he departed from the theoretical position of each on important points.)<sup>18</sup> These developments in the 1930s were evidently not lost on Schapiro, since in his introduction in *New Masses* he observed of the Engels piece that until recently 'this article was practically forgotten. It was excluded from the *Nachlass* of Marx and Engels by their editor, Mehring, who considered it unimportant and out-of-date'.<sup>19</sup>

Schapiro dissented from the orthodox view and contended instead that 'the views of Engels have been justified' by contemporary developments, both in the political arena and in the theoretical sphere. This was the case because of the paradoxical as well as conflictual way in which the Goethe centenary was being greeted in Germany. On the one hand, Goethe was extolled 'by fascist professors and critics as a model Nazi' and, on the other hand, the 'Goethe-meetings of revolutionary proletarian groups are accordingly suppressed'.<sup>20</sup> There was, in addition, an instructive methodological point to be made by resurrecting this essay, since Engels rejected any one-dimensional analysis

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17 Luxemburg 1961, p. 108. (The title of *Leninism or Marxism?* was substituted for the original title 'Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy', when the essay was republished in 1935.) In an interview in New York City on 20 May 1993, Schapiro confirmed that he first read and thought about Rosa Luxemburg's writings in the early 1930s. Schapiro met Karl Korsch, a Luxemburgian Marxist, sometime in the mid-1930s and he met Horkheimer and Lowenthal in 1934, both of whom had a high regard for the position and theoretical writings of Rosa Luxemburg.

18 Wald 1987, pp. 216–17. Wald rightly claims that 'Schapiro was a genuine independent, but a classical Marxist nonetheless ... [who] never railed against non-Stalinist left, nor did he explicitly repudiate Marxism', but then Wald quite erroneously says 'that Schapiro considered himself a revolutionary Leninist ... at least until the 1940s'. Schapiro has long admired Lenin as a revolutionary leader, but he has never believed in the doctrine of 'dialectical materialism' (see note 9 above) or in the Pavlovian behaviourism as well as epistemological realism concomitant with Lenin's position or in any basic contradiction between socialism and democracy (see note 17 above), which is a fundamental supposition of what is normally known as Leninist vanguardism. All of the above also applies to Wald's mistaken belief that, because Schapiro admired Trotsky, he was necessarily a Trotskyist. Why does qualified admiration for a political leader automatically mean that one is a follower of a certain tendency like Leninism or Trotskyism, especially when one disagrees with basic positions associated with the leader in question?

19 Schapiro 1932, p. 13.

20 Ibid.

that simply condemned Goethe as a reactionary or merely celebrated him as a progressive. Schapiro thus observes that 'Engels's criticism should not be confounded with the attacks of those who reject Goethe completely on one count or another'.<sup>21</sup> He continued that: 'Engels does not deny the genius or importance of Goethe because of his class-limitations. On the contrary, it is Engels's chief point that even so great a genius as Goethe could not overcome the weakness of his class, and that the artist, as artist, was affected by his compromise with bourgeois society'.<sup>22</sup> Because of the affinity it possesses with how Schapiro has generally highlighted in his own analyses what he terms 'double meaning' or 'intriguing opposites', Engels's 1847 essay – as tellingly translated by Meyer Schapiro – should be quoted from here:

Goethe stands in his works in a double relation to the German society of his time. Sometimes he is hostile to it: he tries to escape its odiousness ... Sometimes, on the contrary, he is friendly to it, accommodating ... it is the persistent struggle in himself between the poet of genius, disgusted by the wretchedness of his surroundings, and the Frankfurt alderman's cautious child, the privy-councillor of Weimar, who sees himself forced to make a truce with it and to get used to it. Thus, Goethe is now colossal, now petty: now a defiant, ironical, world-scorning genius, now a calculating, complacent, narrow philistine. Even Goethe was unable to overcome the wretchedness of German life; on the contrary, it overcame him, and this victory over the greatest German is the best proof that it cannot be conquered by the individual ... We are not throwing it up to Goethe, *à la* Boerne and Menzel, that he was not a liberal, but that he could even be a philistine at times, ... that he sacrificed his occasionally irrepressible, sounder aesthetic feeling to a small-town aversion from every great historical movement ... In general, we are reproaching him neither from moral nor from partisan standpoints but chiefly from aesthetic and historical standpoints.<sup>23</sup>

This excellent, if little-known, essay by Engels compellingly demonstrates his conviction and that of Marx that a critique was not only about the negation of what was historically regressive, but also about the affirmation of 'what is really worth preserving in historically inherited culture'.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, it reminds us of

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Engels [1872] in Marx and Engels 1973, p. 73.

Engels's own crucial warning that 'the materialist method is converted into its opposite if, instead of being used as a *guiding thread in historical research*, it is made to serve as a *ready-cut pattern on which to tailor historical facts* [my italics]'.<sup>25</sup> And, indeed, as Engels confessed in a letter to Franz Mehring (14 July 1893), both he and Marx had almost always 'failed to stress enough' in their own studies the forces and factors at play aside from 'basic economic facts'.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, they had both 'neglected the formal side' of issues, since 'all action is *mediated* by thought' and since those forces belong to 'one or another sphere [that] may have exercised a co-determining influence on development'.<sup>27</sup>

It was precisely because of his own adroit strategy to avoid the hierarchical framework and economic reductionism of the base/superstructure scheme that Schapiro would come to employ instead an approach that addressed a field of juxtaposed and shifting elements from variously converging domains and intersecting spheres that called for diverse accents at different historical moments.<sup>28</sup>

This conceptual framework in turn allowed him to avoid the fallacy of resorting to one common denominator or to a generative first principle. The contrapuntal interaction posited by Schapiro's approach – which was equally at odds with an irresolute eclecticism and a rigidifying determinism – illuminates quite well the nature of his distinctive dialectical method and also its frequent affinity with the approach of Korsch.

In addition, this dynamic, empirically attentive approach explains the critical shifts in Schapiro's position concerning the relative importance of a factor or force at different points in history. Such was the case, for example, with subjectivity, which Schapiro valued as a much more progressive means for contesting hegemonic values as well as for affirming alternative ones *after* 1940, than he had in the 1930s. And of course the clear analogy here with the same change in critical inflection on the part of the Frankfurt School at the end of the 1930s is significant, especially since Schapiro, in a critique of Pevsner's concept of mod-

25 Engels, 'Letter to Paul Ernst' (5 June 1890) in Marx and Engels 1973, p. 87.

26 Engels, 'Letter to Franz Mehring' (14 July 1893) in Marx and Engels 1973, pp. 99–100. Another letter of equal importance for questions of method was Engels's 'Letter to Joseph Bloch' (21–2 September 1890).

27 Ibid.

28 The related concept of 'paratactic', which is so apt for summarising what is most distinctive about a multi-lateral dialectical approach, is used in Martin Jay's discussion of method in Adorno (Jay 1984, p. 15). For a famous account of the distinctive approach of 'Critical Theory', see Jay 1973, Chapter 11.

ernism, underscored the progressive import of subjectivity in a 1938 review for the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* – which happened to be the same volume in which Adorno published his now famous piece on the fetishistic character of all music, whether jazz or classical, that had been integrated ‘into [the] commercialized mass production’ of an increasingly ‘standardized society’.<sup>29</sup> Thus, there was a methodological consistency over the years to Schapiro’s approach, even when it produced divergent results at different moments in history and necessitated various political commitments in diverse contexts, all of which were nevertheless related to sustaining a lifelong vision of democratic socialism (which should not be equated with social democracy).

This sensitive vision of an alternative to the present system was based both on Marx’s largely overlooked premise that socialism entailed ‘winning the battle for democracy’ and upon views like those of Korsch and Luxemburg (who was also the favourite political leader of Horkheimer and the Frankfurt School),<sup>30</sup> which gave a central role in the socialist movement to workplace democracy and to popular self-representation, as opposed to any indirect party ‘representation’ of the working class. (A point of contention between Schapiro and the Frankfurt School, however, was that he was willing to be publicly critical of the Soviet Union from the mid-1930s through the mid-1950s, when the members of the Frankfurt School were not.)<sup>31</sup> As Schapiro has maintained:

The critique of capitalism [by Marx] is an objective matter; it rests on scientific observations that this economy is incapable of satisfying the wants of the great mass of the people ... [the socialist] has rather to show that by a democratic organization of society, the economic machine is likely to function better and to satisfy the wants now frustrated, and he has to devise a successful method for bringing this about ... acts are judged as good or bad according to the way in which they affect the achievement of the democratic socialist society.<sup>32</sup>

29 Schapiro 1938, pp. 291–3 and Adorno 1938, pp. 321–56.

30 On Horkheimer’s admiration for Rosa Luxemburg, see Jay 1973, p. 14.

31 Interview with Meyer Schapiro and Lillian Milgram by the author, New York City, 3 April 1993. For the position of the Frankfurt School on the USSR, see Jay 1973, p. 20. After 1920 and before the mid-1950s: ‘the Institute maintained an almost complete silence about events in the USSR’. Until Herbert Marcuse’s *Soviet Marxism* (1958), the Frankfurt School ‘never focused the attention of Critical Theory on the left-wing authoritarianism of Stalin’s Russia’ (Jay 1973, p. 20).

32 Schapiro 1940, pp. 477–9.

This nimble analysis of art and society helps us to understand the 'guiding thread' of a flexible method that linked his involvement at various points with a wide range of theoretical tendencies, which have included all of the following: the writings of Marx and Engels (Schapiro formulated, for example, both in 1933 and in 1957/58, brief period assessments that were never published of Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme*);<sup>33</sup> the critical theory of the Frankfurt School; the unusual, non-Stalinist concept of uneven historical development as well as concomitant political orientation put forth by Karl Korsch (whose innovative essay on Marxism was published by *Marxist Quarterly* in 1937 when Schapiro, an admirer of Korsch, was on the editorial board); the political economy of the *Monthly Review* School (Leo Huberman, a founding editor of *Monthly Review* in 1949, cited Schapiro's editorial assistantship in the preface to his classic 1936 critique of the emergence of capitalism, *Man's Worldly Goods*);<sup>34</sup> the *Phénoménologie de la perception* of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Schapiro had stimulating discussions about perception with Merleau-Ponty in Paris during the mid-1940s and still deeply admires Merleau-Ponty's essay on Cézanne);<sup>35</sup> Freudian psychoanalysis (Schapiro, who first read Freud with interest around 1920 and always opposed the Pavlovian behaviourism that reigned in the Soviet Union after the early 1920s, later wrote a classic assessment of psychoanalysis in the 1950s and in fact Schapiro and his wife Lillian also attended lectures by Jacques Lacan in Paris during this period);<sup>36</sup> the particular approach to art history of Max Raphael (Schapiro was one of the first scholars to introduce Raphael's work to a US audience);<sup>37</sup> the progressive use of semiotics associated with Eastern Europe thinkers (Schapiro, who was a long-time friend of Roman Jakobson, spoke on semiotics in 1966 at the International

33 Meyer Schapiro, 'Marx's Critique of the Gotha Program' (1875), in 1933 [1 page typewritten] and in 1957/58 [1 page typewritten] in Folder #37, entitled 'Marxism: 1930s–1950s', Personal Papers of Meyer Schapiro, New York City.

34 Huberman 1936, p. vii. Huberman thanks 'Dr. Meyer Schapiro, for his critical reading of the manuscript and stimulating suggestions'.

35 Interviews with Meyer Schapiro by the author via telephone on 19 February 1993, and New York City, 3 April 1993. About this episode of 1945 or 1947, Schapiro has said: 'Merleau-Ponty's thought was close to my own. His work on Cézanne and on the nature of perception shared quite a lot with my concerns. Merleau-Ponty read an immense amount about art and perception. No other philosopher seemed to know as much about the material process, the concrete technique of making art, or about the complexity of perception'.

36 Interview with Meyer Schapiro and Lillian Milgram, New York City, 3 April 1993.

37 Schapiro translated 'A Marxist Critique of Thomism' by Max Raphael for *Marxist Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 2, April–June 1937, pp. 285–92. This translation is signed simply 'M.S.'.

Colloquium on Semiotics at Zazimierz, Poland);<sup>38</sup> and the dialogical approach to culture of the Russian Marxist Mikhail Bakhtin (whose work Schapiro has known since the late 1930s – in fact it was suppressed by Stalin during this period – and to which he has been drawn because of how it possessed an affinity with his own studies, such as his essays on Seurat in 1935 and on Courbet in 1941).<sup>39</sup>

In the two sections that follow, I shall focus first on the uncommon way in which Schapiro addressed the imbricated logic of historical change and on the particular understanding of development that resulted from his open-ended concept. In the second part, I shall outline some specific gains of Schapiro's remarkable method of art-historical inquiry and look briefly at how it was publicly presented in an unpublished talk of 1939, for a lecture series at the Brooklyn Academy that was organised by Schapiro himself and which included other lectures by T.W. Adorno, Walter Gropius, and Moholy-Nagy.<sup>40</sup> Significantly, Adorno's presentation on Schoenberg and modern music became the nucleus for his highly notable 1941 study, *Philosophie der neuen Musik*.

## I

The distinctive concept of historical materialism that most closely approximates Schapiro's own in his analysis of art has been compellingly outlined by an unorthodox Marxist thinker and activist named Karl Korsch, whom Schapiro has 'admired very much' since he met him in the mid-1930s. Indeed, *Marxist Quarterly*, of which Schapiro was a founding editor, published one of Korsch's most exemplary discussions of historical materialism – which entailed a superb refutation of the concept of history underpinning *both* positivism and 'dialectical materialism' – and it also included a presentation of a non-Stalinist as well as a non-Leninist use of Marxian concepts. This essay, entitled 'Leading Principles of Marxism: A Restatement', appeared in the Fall 1937 issue of *Marxist Quarterly* (issue no. 3), a few months after Schapiro's own well-known

38 For a fine response by the Prague School to Schapiro's importance for semiotics, see: Jiri Veltrusky, 'Some Aspects of the Pictorial Sign' [1973] in Matejka and Titunik 1976, pp. 250–1. For an assessment of Schapiro's contribution to the introduction of semiotics into art history, see: Margaret Iversen, 'Saussure versus Peirce: Models for a Semiotics of Visual Art' in Rees and Borzello 1988, pp. 82–94; and Rosand 1978, pp. 36–51.

39 Interview with Meyer Schapiro and Lillian Milgram by the author, Rawsonville, Vermont, 15 July 1992.

40 Interview with Meyer Schapiro by the author, telephone, 19 February 1993.

article 'The Nature of Abstract Art' (issue no. 1) and in the same issue as Schapiro's review 'The Patrons of Revolutionary Art'.<sup>41</sup> The Korsch essay was in most respects a theoretical overview of the uneven, non-linear and conjunctural concept of historical development that has been concretely developed in all of Schapiro's art-historical analyses since the early 1930s. For that reason, we need to identify Korsch somewhat and to outline his view of historical materialism at some length.

Perhaps the least famous of the major Marxist theoreticians of the first half of the twentieth century, Korsch was nonetheless an influential thinker and revolutionary leader. In 1923, Korsch published *Marxism and Philosophy*, which along with Georg Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* was the main study responsible for reviving a 'critical Marxism' that acknowledged the subjective dimensions of human history and that addressed the central importance of the concept of *Vermittlung*, or mediation, for rigorous historical analysis – in the face of the entirely 'objective' and unabashedly determinist Marxism which then enjoyed semi-official standing in the Soviet Union. In particular, Korsch developed a theory of the subjective preconditions for revolutionary change by demonstrating how orthodox Marxism was incapable of providing such a theory. For Korsch as for Antonio Gramsci, revolutionary change was as much about ideological struggle as it was about material conditions, and orthodox Marxism had simply failed to address this issue with any stringency or sensitivity.<sup>42</sup>

At the time of his book's publication, Korsch was Minister of Justice in the short-lived, revolutionary 'worker's government' that had been established by the Social Democratic Party and by the German Communist Party, of which Korsch was then a member. At the Fifth World Congress of the Comintern, which was held in Moscow during the summer of 1924, however, Zinoviev denounced both Korsch's book and that of Lukács as 'ultra-left deviations' (Korsch was actually sitting in the audience as a delegate from the German C.P.). In 1926, when he was a member of the Reichstag, Korsch was expelled from the party because, recalling Rosa Luxemburg's earlier warnings, he opposed a pending arms pact between the Soviet and German governments. During the late 1920s in Berlin, Korsch gave lectures on and led discussions about Marxism that were attended by both novelist Alfred Döblin and playwright Bertolt Brecht, the latter of whom is sometimes considered a pupil of

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41 Korsch 1937, pp. 356–78.

42 Halliday in the Translator's Introduction to Korsch 1970, pp. 11–13; also see Korsch 1972, pp. 3–8.



Korsch.<sup>43</sup> And indeed Brecht remained a close friend of Korsch for a long time thereafter. (As noted before, Brecht also saw Schapiro several times in the late 1940s.) In 1933, Korsch fled the Nazis, first to England and then in 1936 to the United States where he became identified with the 'workers' council' movement on behalf of socialism.<sup>44</sup>

One of Korsch's most lasting legacies was the fundamental stimulus that his critical rethinking of Marxism – in opposition to the metaphysics of scientism or 'dialectical materialism' and as a critique of the anti-democratic centralism intrinsic to Leninism – gave not only to the foundation in 1923 of the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt, but also to the new direction that it took in the 1930s. In fact, Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* first appeared in a Frankfurt School publication, namely, the *Grünbergs Archiv*.<sup>45</sup> When he emigrated to New York (two years after Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Lowenthal had come in 1934 to set up the Institute in exile), Korsch became loosely affiliated with the Frankfurt School, in whose journal, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, he had already published some reviews since its foundation in 1932.<sup>46</sup> Significantly, Meyer Schapiro met Korsch at a time when both were already on friendly terms with the members of the Frankfurt School, especially Leo Lowenthal and Adorno (after the latter's arrival in 1938), most of whom Schapiro had sought out shortly after their arrival at Columbia University in 1934.<sup>47</sup>

In a 1938 public gathering to which he had been invited by Adorno, Schapiro did a series of portrait sketches of various members of the Institute. These drawings in pencil include portraits of Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal, Franz Neumann, and Erich Fromm. For our purposes, it is worth noting that the concept and the term of 'Critical Theory', with its clear debt to the on-going work of Korsch and to the early Lukács, originated in 1937–8 in the pages of the Frankfurt journal. This was at the same time that Schapiro not only gave editorial advice to reviews editor Leo Lowenthal, but also published a piece in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. About his warm friendship with

43 Special Issue, 'Karl Korsch: Lehrer Bertolt Brecht', alternative, April 1965. Also see Korsch 1970; and Korsch 1972.

44 Mattick 1964, pp. 86–97.

45 Jay 1973, p. 10, p. 13, p. 27 and p. 42.

46 In volume 1, 1932, of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, for example, Korsch published short critiques of Lenin's *Über den historischen Materialismus* (p. 423), and of Julius Schaxel's *Das Weltbild der Gegenwart und seine gesellschaftlichen Grundlagen*. In volume 11, 1933, Korsch published a review of Michael Freund's book, *Georges Sorel* (p. 116).

47 Interview with Meyer Schapiro by the author, telephone, 19 February 1993. For a summary of the Frankfurt School's move to New York City, see: Jay 1973, pp. 39–40.

Adorno from 1938 to 1941 (when Adorno moved to California and became the adviser on music theory for Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*), Schapiro has stated in a recent interview:

I saw Adorno constantly and he was very friendly with me. We usually discussed the political situation in Germany, which greatly disturbed him. Since he lived on the Upper West Side near Columbia, Adorno would drop in on me quite often.<sup>48</sup>

The subtle multi-lateral and non-Eurocentric concept of uneven historical development that had already figured so significantly in the writings of Schapiro (and would continue to do so throughout his career) was compellingly presented as follows by Karl Korsch in his 1937 essay in *Marxist Quarterly*:

[Marx] spoke of 'Positivism' and 'Comtism' as of something to which he was 'thoroughly opposed as a politician' and of which he had 'a very poor opinion as a man of science'. Marx's attitude is theoretically and historically well-founded.

The Marxist critique of the development concept of bourgeois social science starts from a recognition of the illusionary character so that '*so-called historical evolution*', according to which '*the last stage regards the preceding stages as being only preliminary to itself, and therefore can only look at them one-sidedly*'. Just where Marx seems to adopt this naive pseudo-Darwinian metaphysics of evolution, which later was fully and blindly accepted by such orthodox Marxists as Kautsky ... he actually reverses the whole conception and thereby destroys its metaphysical character.

This critical consciousness breaks the magic spell of the metaphysical 'law' of evolution. From a valid *a priori* axiom, it is reduced to a working hypothesis which must be empirically verified in each case ... Bourgeois society may contain the relations of earlier societies in a further developed form. It may [however] contain them as well in degenerate, stunted and travestied forms ... It likewise contains within itself the germs of future developments of present society, though by no means their complete determination.

The false idealistic concept of evolution as applied by bourgeois social theorists, is *closed* on both sides, and in all past and future forms of society

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48 Interview with Meyer Schapiro by the author, telephone, February 19, 1993.

rediscovers itself. The new, critical and materialistic Marxist principle of development is, on the other hand, *open on both sides*. *Marx does not deal with Asiatic, Antique, or Feudal society, and still less with those primitive societies which preceded all written history, merely as 'preliminary stages' of contemporary society*. He regards them, in their totality, as so many historical formations which are to be understood in terms of their own categories ... [my italics]<sup>49</sup>

In an article from two years before, in 1935 in *Modern Quarterly*, which should be seen as a pendant to the piece in *Marxist Quarterly*, Korsch had defended his own uncommon approach to Marxism by means of a stringent rereading of Marx in the original and in opposition to the standard secondary commentaries on these texts. Such a return to primary documents should remind one that for the Marxists, 'there is no such thing as "Marxism" in general' and it would disallow any defence of 'the "materialistic dialectic", now inflated into an eternal law of cosmic development' by the 'pseudo-scientific interpretation of orthodox Marxism'.<sup>50</sup> Far from endorsing dialectical thinking as 'a 'supra-historic' principle',<sup>51</sup> Korsch agreed instead with 'such old revolutionary Marxists as Rosa Luxemburg and Franz Mehring' who understood the 'materialistic dialectic' as 'nothing more than the specific relation of all economic terms and propositions to *historically* determined objects'.<sup>52</sup>

As strongly contested on the left in the 1930s as Korsch's emphasis on the 'historical and concrete character of all propositions' of Marxian theory (especially when they were 'apparently universal' and purportedly 'free from judgements of value') was Korsch's position that 'Marxism is not *positive*' but from beginning to end 'a theoretical as well as practical *critique* of existing society'.<sup>53</sup> The use of 'critical Marxism' had, however, been 'forgotten by the citizens of the Marxist Soviet State today who emphasize the general and universal validity of the fundamental Marxist proposition in order to canonize the doctrines underlying the present constitution of the state'.<sup>54</sup> This ossification of Marxism into an apology for an established order had actually begun prior to Stalin's consolidation of power. To quote Korsch at length on this issue:

49 Korsch 1937, p. 356 and pp. 375–6.

50 Korsch 1935, pp. 88–95. Reprinted in Korsch 1972, pp. 60–71. The quotations in my text are from Korsch 1972, p. 60 and p. 62.

51 Korsch 1972, p. 64.

52 Korsch 1972, p. 66.

53 Korsch 1972, p. 65.

54 Korsch 1972, p. 62.

But neither Sorel, the Syndicalist, nor Lenin, the Communist, utilised the full force and impact of the original Marxian 'critique' ... Lenin's somewhat crude division of the propositions of philosophy, economics, etc., into those which are '*useful*' or '*harmful*' to the proletariat (a result of his too exclusive concern with the immediate present effects of accepting or denying them, and his too little consideration of their possible future and ultimate effects) introduced that coagulation of Marxist theory, that decline and, in part, distortion of revolutionary Marxism, which renders it very difficult for present-day Soviet-Marxism to make any headway outside the boundaries of its own authoritarian domain.<sup>55</sup>

Korsch's position to the contrary was that Marxist theory '*eschews every attempt to force all experience into the design of a monistic construction of the universe in order to build a unified system of knowledge* [my italics]'.<sup>56</sup> This version of an open-ended, empirically accountable 'critical Marxism' – concomitant with an uneven and polyvalent concept of historical development – recalls both the fundamental critique of the deeply paradoxical legacy of the European Enlightenment that was originated by the Frankfurt School in the 1930s ('the whole is the untruth' to quote a famous aphorism of Adorno) and also Schapiro's art-historical method that was developed a little earlier in the decade and has been used ever since by him. In fact, Schapiro, in his celebrated 1953 essay on style, concluded with a qualified endorsement of a systematic, but not system-building, 'critical Marxism' along the lines of Karl Korsch's position, when he concluded the following at the end of his survey of art-historical methods:

Marxist writers are among the few who have tried to apply a general theory. It is based on Marx's undeveloped view that the higher forms of cultural life correspond to the economic structure of society ... Only broadly sketched in Marx's works, the theory has rarely been applied systematically in a true spirit of investigation, such as we see in Marx's economic writings. Marxist writing on art has suffered from schematic and premature formulations and from crude judgments imposed by a party line.<sup>57</sup>

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55 Korsch 1972, p. 67.

56 Korsch 1972, p. 68.

57 Schapiro 1994 [1953], p. 100. Furthermore, Schapiro has pointed out that when, during the Gorbachev Period, 'my essay on style was finally published in the USSR ... they left out my

A corollary to this critique of the mainstream philosophy presupposed by art-historical studies along orthodox Marxist lines was an earlier and far more stinging critique that Schapiro published in *Partisan Review* in 1943 under the pseudonym of 'David Merian' (to protect himself from political persecution) and which was directed at the positivism and scientism in the West that formed the ideological underpinning for formalism. This critique – which recalls the main thesis of *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (that was completed in 1944) by Horkheimer and Adorno – was a clinical dissection of the 'scientific' pretensions and tedious red-baiting of Sidney Hook and went as follows:

The fact that scientific method in psychology and the social fields may also be applied for fascist and counterrevolutionary ends ... should keep us from this empty veneration of method ... The choice today is not between supernaturalism and naturalism, irrationality and science. It is between the socialist program and the half dozen schemes which are more or less naturalistic and scientific in their economic and political calculations, but are designed to maintain the present system with all its cruelties and chaos. The greatest enemy is not the metaphysician or the priest, dangerous as he may be, but the armed class opponent who uses the resources of science for his own ends.<sup>58</sup>

In fact, the basic preconditions for such a 'critical' theory of style, which relied neither on positivism nor on orthodox Marxism, were sketched by Schapiro in a still unpublished lecture of 1939. It is to the content of that lecture that we shall turn at the end of this paper. First, though, we need to examine the concrete insights of Schapiro's *esprit systématique* in some of his writings, beginning in the 1930s.

## II

One of Schapiro's most important formulations for addressing the disharmonious unity or unified disharmony of Western artworks is his concept of 'discoordination' (which was used, for example, in his 1939 article on 'The Sculptures

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closing observation that Marxist studies of art (in the USSR and elsewhere) are still in need of development and do not constitute a "system". Interview with Meyer Schapiro by the author, telephone, 20 August 1992.

58 'David Merian' [Meyer Schapiro] 1943, p. 257.

of Souillac').<sup>59</sup> By this concept, he means: 'A grouping or division such that corresponding sets of elements include parts, relations, or properties which negate that correspondence.'<sup>60</sup> In the most intelligent discussion to date of this manoeuvre, Donald Kuspit has pointed out how this operation also leads to its contrary, thus preserving a sense of on-going tensions both along class-based lines and in syntactical or formal terms. To quote Kuspit, this distinctive approach of Schapiro allows him to recognise that there are the following: 'Discoordinated rather than uncoordinated elements – elements in rather than out of relationship, but not with easy, obvious harmony, and so at first glance out of relationship'.<sup>61</sup>

As Kuspit notes, much of Schapiro's writing empirically amends the superficial first glance of others. Through the concept of discoordination, for example, Schapiro arrives at what he calls a 'double action', in which he shows that 'seemingly self-evident incoherence in fact involves secret coherence: apparent disharmony is occult harmony'. Thus 'contradiction' is experienced – in the sculpture at Souillac – as "implied coordination", and the divergences and convergences which constitute the "discoordinate structure" issue in "a necessary balanced scheme", but this scheme is one whose balance depends on the negation of the usual order of the symmetrical scheme.<sup>62</sup>

The chiasmic relationship of divergent elements that Schapiro so deftly locates in the multicultural character of Western art, as in the interplay of Romanesque and Mozarabic visual idioms at Moissac or Silos, is also identified with comparable resourcefulness as an attribute of the peculiar conjuncture of class tensions – both of an inter-class and of an intra-class sort – that involved institutional coercion and popular contestation, as well as ethnic unrest, at the precise historical moment when an ascendant but hardly monolithic religious hierarchy associated with feudalism was being challenged by an emergent but never entirely unified group of secular burghers, each of which was also connected in varying ways to a previously dominant Moorish culture with its own internal play of popular forces and hierarchical counter-forces.

Schapiro's singular and for us signal way of using a class analysis in tandem with a markedly non-Eurocentric concept of non-linear and uneven histor-

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59 Schapiro 1977, p. 104 [1939]. The concept was first pointed out and discussed by Kuspit 1978, pp. 93–129. Another fine article about Schapiro's method for arriving at the general within the particular is Plummer 1978, pp. 164–75.

60 Kuspit 1978, p. 104.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

ical development was fundamentally opposed to the brittle 'either/or-ism' of orthodox Marxist studies in this period. (The Soviet Marxist approach to culture of Stalin, Zhadanov, and Lifshitz was also unabashedly Eurocentric, as Che Guevara would later note in a critique of 'socialist realism'.)<sup>63</sup> Conversely, Schapiro's method was justifiably in keeping with the critiques of Karl Korsch and, to a lesser extent, those of the Frankfurt School, for whom Nietzsche had been important despite his opposition to socialism and to democracy, owing (in Adorno's words of 1947) to '[Nietzsche's] unique demonstration of the repressive character of occidental culture'.<sup>64</sup> The innovative art-historical approach to Schapiro first surfaced in the late 1920s and early 1930s in his work on the abbey of Moissac, the monastery of Silos, and the abbey of Souillac, although the articles about these three sites sometimes appeared long after they were originally conceived and written. (As Schapiro has emphasised in a recent interview, the essay on Silos was formulated for the most part several years before it was published and it was done in conjunction with his pieces on Moissac and Souillac. There was thus no methodological or even chronological divide separating his approaches to these various sites, however varied the accents in these essays might seem.<sup>65</sup>)

In discussing the Romanesque in Spain along with southern France, Schapiro observed that the 'Romanesque can hardly be considered a gradually evolved form of Mozarabic art'<sup>66</sup> or a simple supersession of an earlier style. Nor was this over determined interrelationship and on-going cross-cultural coincidence of forms 'due to a chance survival of random works from a time when one of these styles was predominant'.<sup>67</sup> Rather, Schapiro astutely reasoned as follows in his Silos essay:

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63 Guevara 1977, pp. 264–7.

64 Adorno 1947, p. 161. For an overview of the Frankfurt critique of Nietzsche, see Jay 1973, pp. 50–1.

65 Schapiro has refuted the scheme of development which would have us believe that he was more of a Marxist in his 1939 Silos article than otherwise, because of a supposed influence by Mikhail Lifshitz's *Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx* (1938). Schapiro has disallowed this theory about his purported development by emphatically stating as follows of the Silos article: 'In fact, the article was largely written in the late 1920s (1928–9) and represents my position from then until now. Furthermore, I had not read Lifshitz's book at the time. Nor is it a book that I find of any real interest' (Interview with Meyer Schapiro by the author, telephone, 20 August 1992). The position to which Schapiro was responding was that of Karl Werckmeister's review of Schapiro's *Romanesque Art* (Werckmeister 1979, pp. 213–16).

66 Schapiro 1977, p. 29.

67 Ibid.

[A] coincidence of styles is not unparalleled in medieval art. It appears especially in times of crucial change. Then new forms may emerge beside an older art not simply as a development from it, but as its negation, and the old may persist beside the new in affirming an opposed or declining culture.

In Silos the opposition of Mozarabic and Romanesque is hardly as thorough as would appear from larger contrast ... But there is an evident difference between the persistence of qualities of Mozarabic styles *within* Romanesque, as a matter of historical continuity or transition, and the persistence of Mozarabic style as a whole *beside* Romanesque art, as an effort of conservation. It is these varying relations of Mozarabic and Romanesque which will be investigated, in their broader contexts, in this paper.<sup>68</sup>

Combined as it was with an effective use of formal analysis (which presupposed a Marxian concept of art as a form of labour) and a notable capacity to engage in iconographic analysis (which entailed an emphasis on the class-inflected character of institutional sign systems), Schapiro's heterogeneous and multi-lateral approach to uneven art-historical development was largely without historical precedent. The dynamic and contrapuntal nature of this method allowed him to analyse class tensions and factual conflicts without having to assume a one-to-one correspondence between any group or class (none of which were defined in monolithic terms, contrary to orthodox Marxism from the 1930s until the present) *and* a given style (each of which is seen in such a way as to accommodate the frequent permutations that alter any visual language). Accordingly, Schapiro was able to forego a facile equation of style with any one determinate 'visual ideology', since a style is understood to be, along with many other things (including a form of labour, a confluence of pictorial idioms, and a social bond), a *site of convergence for competing ideological values*, all of which entails an interplay in the arts of the subaltern and the hegemonic, of horizontally-situated organic practices and vertically imposed official doctrines.

The result in his Silos essay is a broad ranging and nuanced grasp of inter-laced social formations and concomitant artistic entanglements that extend from the gnostic folklore identified with some popular sectors and the *jongleurs* most identified with newly ascendant burghers, to the realism of particulars on the margins that was injected by urban artisans and the abstract

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68 Schapiro 1977, pp. 29–30.



artistic conventions associated (at certain moments) with an older Moorish population that was largely agrarian and linked (at other moments) with pockets of doctrinal conservatism within Christian monastic orders. Emerging from this fluid back-and-forth dynamic are firmly symptomatic contradictions on which Schapiro deftly focuses, such as those confronting dominant religious doctrines, 'since these doctrines, no matter how spiritualized and mystical, must call constantly on the evidence of history and the senses'.<sup>69</sup> About the *Doubling Thomas* sculpted relief in the cloister of Silos, 'which gives the richest evidence of this interaction of Romanesque and Mozarabic',<sup>70</sup> in addition to being a revealing look at the structural tension between an emergent burgher class and an entrenched feudal caste, Schapiro points out that 'the church promotes forms of naturalistic representation that seem to contradict the denial of the senses on which the underlying doctrine is based'<sup>71</sup> – just as the medieval church also, at certain moments, promoted an appreciation of aesthetic experience with a necessarily materialistic and secular basis that contravened its own strictures on the sensuous and the sensual (as Schapiro would note in an essay of 1947).<sup>72</sup>

On the one hand, then, the institutional dictates of the church hierarchy, in light of its clear doctrinal investment in the immaterial and the impalpable, would be associated with the hieratic and static conventions of much non-Christian Mozarabic art, but on the other hand, the very cultural ascendancy in Spain of the Church of Rome over the previous Islamic faith was much allied with the importation of an urban, more materialist, culture of artisans and burghers whose art of realist tendencies was markedly non-hierarchical in tenor. Conversely, the Mozarabic culture of Spain, with its absolutist transcendentalism, remained associated with a sometimes popular culture of a subordinate ethnic group largely identified with a peasant class, even as the hieratic formal conventions of this art would normally be associated with a ruling order rather than an order ruled. Thus, in neither of these cases, where

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69 Schapiro 1977, p. 47.

70 Schapiro 1977, p. p. 54.

71 Schapiro 1977, p. p. 47.

72 Schapiro 1977 [1947], pp. 1–27. In refuting the mainstream view that 'medieval art was strictly religious and symbolical', he used a sensitive Marxian approach that featured a class analysis. For example, Schapiro pointed out that the new 'conscious taste of spectators for the beauty of workmanship, materials, and artistic devices, apart from religious meanings' was clearly interrelated with the 'urban development, the social relationships, arising from the new strength of the merchants and the artisans as a class' (p. 2).

the multiple coordinates and uneven trajectory of Romanesque class-tensions have been so incisively charted by Schapiro, can we rely on any mechanical connections between a class or ethnic group and a visual language uninflected by counter-trends. Similarly, what is historically regressive and what is historically progressive cannot be automatically located in a closed, symmetrical, and linear scheme, such as that upon which 'dialectical materialism' has generally depended.

Nothing underscores more the unlikely progressive possibilities for art of the future to be found in such a paradoxically 'discoordinated' understanding of past artworks than the case of Fernand Léger's large paintings after 1940. For, owing to Schapiro's personal intervention on this point in 1935 (in a story that is now well-known),<sup>73</sup> Léger subsequently drew on pictorial conventions of Mozarabic manuscript illumination (as in the *Commentary on the Apocalypse by Beatus of Liebana* of the eleventh century) – conventions that were simultaneously popular and transcendental, both subaltern and hegemonic – and that by the eleventh century were already *passé* and clearly 'superseded' historically, at least within a linear framework. Yet in such paintings as *Le Grand Parade* of 1953–4, Léger synthesised a medieval Moorish sense of design and non-descriptive or non-naturalistic colour bands (then associated with a vanquished and exploited class and/or ethnic group) with a modernist figurative tradition and with popular subjects 'of the people' to arrive at some of the more successful paintings, both politically and aesthetically, by an artist of the post-war left in France.

Nor should we forget that Schapiro – who has always maintained (as did Engels in his essay on Goethe) that aesthetic experience can be 'a starting point of radical thought'<sup>74</sup> – had earlier been influenced by avant-garde artists like Léger and Picasso in the selection of his dissertation topic in 1925–6, precisely because of a sense of the still unrealised resources of much past art (in 1937 as well as in 1953 and 1957, Schapiro specifically singled out primitivism in some senses as a progressive counter both to colonialism and to Eurocentrism and in other senses as a regressive accompaniment to these same forces).<sup>75</sup> These are

73 Epstein 1983, pp. 61–2.

74 Schapiro 1961, p. 63. Similarly, Terry Eagleton, in an important study, has written of the potentially progressive nature of aesthetic experience, as a 'vision of human energies as radical ends in themselves which is the implacable enemy of all dominative or instrumentalist thought' and 'thus [is] the first stirrings of a primitive materialism' (Eagleton 1990, p. 9 and p. 13).

75 Schapiro 1978 [1937], pp. 200–01; and Schapiro 1957, p. 37.

possibilities that a single-minded proponent of Western realism and one-sided evolutionism would simply dismiss out of hand. About his decision to work on Romanesque art, specifically in the abbey at Moissac, Schapiro gave two reasons, both of which were loaded with aesthetic and ideological pertinence for the present:

[First] the interplay between folk and high art. Wild fantasy, obscenity, parody, jokes. It was an artistically rich and fertile style. Secondly, in the forms was a primitive element. The largeness, the starkness, the solemnity. I found parallels in twentieth-century art. There is great strength in the simple forms; it's like plainsong – voluminous, sonorous, clear and strong.<sup>76</sup>

Schapiro's critique of contemporary art from the 1930s till the present grew out of a comparably complex approach to historical development. His early admiration for Frida Kahlo's then little-known work (she and Diego Rivera visited the Schapiros several times in the early 1930s)<sup>77</sup> was based on the interchange in her paintings between Western and non-Western art as well as the profound interlacing of popular culture with high art. In recommending her for a Guggenheim Grant in 1940 (her application was unsuccessful in spite of the fact that André Breton and Marcel Duchamp were two of the other referees for her),<sup>78</sup> Schapiro wrote of Frida Kahlo as follows:

She [Frida Kahlo] is an excellent painter, of real originality, one of the most interesting Mexican artists I know. Her work looks well beside the best pictures of Orozco and Rivera; in some it is more natively Mexican than theirs. If she hasn't their heroic and tragic sentiment, she is nearer to common Mexican tradition and feeling for decorative form.<sup>79</sup>

76 Epstein 1983, p. 79.

77 Interview with Meyer Schapiro and Lillian Milgram by the author, Rawsonville, Vermont, 15 July 1992. About Frida Kahlo's friendship with Meyer, Lillian Milgram has commented: 'Frida Kahlo was quite taken with Meyer. She gave him gifts on a few occasions [one of which is a pre-Columbian figurine that is still in the Schapiros' private collection]'.  
78 Herrera 1983, pp. 287–8.

79 Meyer Schapiro 1940, 'Recommendation of Frida Kahlo for the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation's Interamerican Competition'. This transcribed summary in the Archives of the Guggenheim of an application that no longer exists. First cited in Herrera 1983, pp. 287–8.

Significantly, his essays on modernism and the avant-garde – whether we mean the ones that single out the progressive potential of modernity, as in his essays of 1932, 1937, or 1957 or those that focus on the reactionary tendencies, as in his essays of 1936, 1941, or 1956<sup>80</sup> – disallow any linear concept of stylistic advances that would privilege realism over modernism or, conversely, abstraction over figuration. In his response to Alfred Barr, Schapiro stated quite unequivocally that the ‘opposition of realistic and abstract art’ along with the narrow line of development presupposed by it were ‘thoroughly one-sided and rest on a mistaken idea of what representation is’.<sup>81</sup> And this position is noteworthy, since – in refusing to accept the terms of any debate involving ‘realism versus modernism’ – Schapiro was at odds with most of the major Marxist thinkers of the first half of the twentieth century, from Lukács and Adorno through Benjamin and Bloch (all of whom made excellent arguments either for realism or for modernism).<sup>82</sup>

This uncommon position – which helps us to appreciate Schapiro’s subsequent defence of the sometime progressive character of Abstract Expressionism<sup>83</sup> – brings us back to the problem of a general conceptual framework capable of accommodating these divergent components of the visual arts with all their discoordinated unity. Such a conceptual framework was put forth in a 1939 talk in Brooklyn entitled ‘Art and Society’, in which Schapiro lodged a sophisticated disallowance of the view that ‘one art or style is more social than another’, since within this one-sided position ‘one type of social relation becomes normative, namely the organized collective or institutional, or the politically instrumental’.<sup>84</sup>

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80 Schapiro has been quite emphatic about the fact that his 1936 essay, ‘On the Social Bases of Art’, was not a dismissal of modernism in the name of realism. As he has declared: ‘My essay on the social bases of art was not meant to be a blanket condemnation of modern art!! Rather, it was meant to be a criticism of certain tendencies within modern art’. Interview with Meyer Schapiro by the author, telephone, 19 February 1993. One of the most insightful discussions of Schapiro’s position in the early 1930s is found in Ashton 1992 [1972], pp. 56–61.

81 Schapiro 1978, p. 195.

82 For a survey of the Eastern European Marxist position on realism and for the Latin American Marxist position in relation to it, see Mosquera 1986a, pp. 23–37.

83 For an extension of this discussion, see Chapter 28.

84 Meyer Schapiro, ‘Art and Society’, February 1939 Lecture and Introduction to the Fine Arts Lecture Series at the Brooklyn Academy of Music [unpublished 4 page typewritten manuscript], p. 1, in Folder #17, The Personal Papers of Meyer Schapiro, New York City.

In response, Schapiro posited two broad considerations: that art has 'a social function by virtue of its capacity to unite or consolidate [people], to concretize their common experience, and to enable the individual to acquire the results of other's thinking and feeling and perception'.<sup>85</sup> Thus, art is seen here as a social bond that furthers in aesthetic terms the process of human self-realisation through the non-instrumental refinement of the senses, and through the critical engagement of the intellect. Similarly, art is also construed as a social bond in extra-aesthetic ways, such as, in ethical, political, and ideological terms, since 'art is a value involved in other values, and potentially a means in all human relations'.<sup>86</sup>

Because of the contradictory structure of Western capitalist society, however, the potential of art as a progressively formative societal bond is deferred to a large extent. On the one hand, Schapiro maintained, there is 'the importance of the highly individualized arts for future democratic society', but, on the other hand, the 'individualized arts' of the period are also 'bound up with uniformity and anxiety, not freedom',<sup>87</sup> owing to the way that they are interwoven with the social fabric of Western society. Earlier, in a preliminary hand-written outline (which is still preserved) for this same 1939 lecture, Schapiro had formulated this inextricable paradox by saying that 'modern artistic individualism is a product of [the] bourgeoisie which enters into conflict with [the] bourgeoisie'.<sup>88</sup>

His subsequent and related introduction to the 1939 Brooklyn Academy of Music Lecture Series was based on an elaboration on the social nature of art by means of five basic theses. First, there was an acknowledgement that art is 'social in its communicative and symbolic character', because it is a language and a 'language is social' not only as a 'means of conveying meanings' but also through a 'common mode of transaction and reflection'.<sup>89</sup> (This point obviously anticipates his later concern with semiotics.) Second, there was attention given to 'art vs. performance or entertainment' since 'art not only communicates but makes a community'.<sup>90</sup> (And here we are immediately reminded both of the Frankfurt School on the 'culture industry' and of Schapiro's 1956–7

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85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

88 Meyer Schapiro, 'Art and Society', Preliminary Outline [4 pages handwritten], p. 2, in Folder #17, The Personal Papers of Meyer Schapiro, New York City.

89 Meyer Schapiro, 'Art and Society', Lecture and Introduction to the 1939 Brooklyn Lecture Series, p. 3.

90 Ibid.

defence of Abstract Expressionism along these lines.)<sup>91</sup> Third, there was the recognition that art is social as a direct consequence of its relationship to 'particular institutions or social groups – religion, state, war, morals, political party'.<sup>92</sup> Fourth, there was an emphasis on art as a product of labour, as a material means 'acquired and developed collectively and in time', involving specific instruments, particular techniques, specified pigments, and special forms.<sup>93</sup> (This is a dimension, namely, the medium and its conventions, that formalists like Greenberg have reified as the 'essence' of art, at the expense of these other dimensions.) Fifth, there was the observation that art is 'shaped in its content by existing society', but not in a manner that is free of contradictions or that permits instant analysis.<sup>94</sup>

Accordingly, Schapiro concluded that these five different coordinates of the social dimensions of art, which converge at various points at different moments in history, render implausible any talk of an art that is 'non-social or less social'.<sup>95</sup> Rather, we should speak of the diverse ways in which different artworks and styles are social. In particular, this would mean addressing a) an art's 'range of audience' and b) its 'reference to particular social groups'.<sup>96</sup> Thus, any 'critique of greater or less sociability is really a disguised form of a) or b). But these are not criteria of either social worth or artistic worth'.<sup>97</sup> Significantly, this lecture in turn bolsters Schapiro's contention in the 1937 *Marxist Quarterly* that: 'The fact that a work of art has a politically radical content therefore does not assure its revolutionary value, nor does a non-political content necessarily imply its irrelevance to revolutionary action'. As history makes clear, in the right historical context, 'works without political intention have by their honesty and vigour excited [people] to a serious questioning of themselves and their loyalties: they have destroyed the faith in feudal or bourgeois values and helped to create the moral courage necessary for revolutionary action and will'.<sup>98</sup>

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91 Meyer Schapiro 1957, pp. 40–2.

92 Meyer Schapiro, 'Art and Society', Lecture and Introduction to the 1939 Lecture Series, p. 3. (Folder #17, The Personal Papers of Meyer Schapiro, New York City).

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

95 Schapiro, 'Art and Society', Lecture and Introduction to the 1939 Lecture Series, p. 4 (Folder #17, The Personal Papers of Meyer Schapiro, New York City).

96 Ibid.

97 Ibid.

98 Schapiro 1937, p. 465.

We should not conclude without asking about Meyer Schapiro's own double relation to his method and to his times. The necessarily equivocal relationship of a dialectician to dialectical thinking – and Schapiro has often written at length about various misuses of dialectical thinking<sup>99</sup> – was deftly summarised by Adorno in *Minima Moralia* (1945): 'Dialectical thought is an attempt to break through the coercion of logic by its own means. But since it must use these means, it is at every moment in danger of itself acquiring a coercive character'.<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, Schapiro's method has been applied with such resourcefulness that it has seldom become its opposite, however much it has incessantly addressed polarities in everything else.

Politically speaking, Schapiro's double relation to his times has been another matter and he seems of two minds about it. This unresolved (and at times ineffectual) relationship was addressed at length in a public concession in 1943/44 of his own competing and not always easily reconciled proclivities. Because of the humanity of his statement and owing to its pressing importance for our current predicament in history, I shall end with Schapiro's self-assessment:

A guaranteed solution is not in question ... The real opposition is between the ideal of an essentially personal radicalism (a lordly cultured radicalism à la Herzen), without a party or a carefully thought-out theory, *and* a highly energetic, constantly active, scientific-minded radicalism like Lenin's and RL's [Rosa Luxemburg's], which is so independent that it may even denounce the party and fight against it. If you favour the first, you are inclined to be more lax, tolerant, curious, free and versatile today; if you are the other, you tend to a certain harshness, insistence, polemical spirit, dogmatism, pedantry, but also shrewdness and militancy of an incomparable kind.

My own life inclines me to the first, since I love nature, art, people, science, everything that stimulates my senses and my thought; but my reason and observation lead me to the second, since in observing and considering the two kinds of activity, and I have known splendid examples of both, whom I revere, I consider the second deeper, truer, more sound with respect to present actuality. The promise of socialism insofar as it involves the overthrow of capitalism lies rather with the second; insofar

99 For an excellent look at Schapiro's critique of misuses of dialectical thinking, see Kuspit 1978, pp. 93–129.

100 Adorno 1974 [1944–47], p. 150.

as it involves the creation of socialism, it lies rather with the first; but the best qualities of the first are shared by non-socialists, especially among artists; of the second, I find it only in revolutionaries today, and nowhere else. The highest consciousness of society, the ability to foresee the next step, to act with fullest insight as well as courage is rare and indispensable.<sup>101</sup>

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101 Schapiro, 'Ten Theses for a Public Discussion with Nicola Chiaromonte in 1943–44,' pp. 2–3 (in Folder #37, The Personal Papers of Meyer Schapiro, New York City).



## Clement Greenberg and the ‘Triumph’ of Western Art

Had he ever questioned Bertrand Russell about the ‘essence of the medium’ in painting or sculpture, Clement Greenberg would have encountered a bemused expression – not, of course, because the British philosopher could not provide an answer, but because he would not permit the question. Russell would no doubt have responded to such a query as he had written elsewhere:

The notion of essence is an intimate part of every philosophy subsequent to Aristotle, until we come to modern times. It is, in my opinion, a hopelessly muddle-headed notion ... The question is purely linguistic: a ‘word’ may have an essence, but a ‘thing’ cannot.<sup>1</sup>

While this exchange is hypothetical, the internal problems that it poses for Greenberg’s avowedly positivist concept of so-called ‘pure’ painting are real enough. After all, positivists from Auguste Comte and Rudolf Carnap through A.J. Ayer and Bertrand Russell have all abandoned the quest to discover essences and have *attempted* instead an empirically verifiable description of what is supposed to be perceptually ‘given’.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, as recently as 1990 (in an interview with the late Peter Fuller), Greenberg commented as follows when asked about the so-called ‘philosophical materialism’ apparently underpinning his criticism, particularly in his earlier writings:

My positivism, you could call it, because I didn’t buy dialectical materialism. I wasn’t that untutored ... When I wrote about art as art, Marxism had no place ... I talked about positivism, and wrote about it, and I thought this is what Modernism since Manet came down to ... [My criticism] was positivistic in so far as it didn’t allow for anything but the *thing*, the *res*.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Russell 1945, pp. 162–3.

2 Ayer 1952 [1936].

3 Greenberg and Fuller 1991; this interview was published as ‘Clement Greenberg with Peter Fuller’ in *Modern Painters*, 4, 4, Winter 1991: 19–20.

Yet the *essentialist*, hence also contradictory, character of Greenberg's neo-positivist view of Modernism is easily demonstrated by summarising his 1960 piece entitled 'Modernist Painting'. In this well-known essay, Greenberg defined the 'essence of Modernism' as a form of 'self-criticism' that grew out of the Enlightenment and was purportedly restricted largely to artistic practices which dealt with 'all that was unique to the nature of its medium'. The resulting practices based on this insight would involve a marathon process of formal deletion whereby the so-called 'alien' elements of a given medium would be progressively purged. Accordingly, formal 'purity' would both advance 'self-definition' and also establish 'the guarantee of its standards of qualities'.<sup>4</sup>

This *mono-directional* approach emerged with Manet, he claimed, whose paintings were 'the first Modernist ones by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the surfaces on which they were painted', thus emphasising so-called 'purely optical experience' over any perception revised by 'tactile associations'.<sup>5</sup>

Validity for this resolutely linear development was found, Greenberg contended, in the way that it supposedly brought the visual arts 'closer in spirit to scientific method than ever before'. Although, as Greenberg has conceded, 'no one [modern] artist was, or is yet, consciously aware of this tendency', it remains demonstrable nonetheless that 'Modernist art belongs to the same historical and cultural tendency as modern science', since it supposedly converts any 'theoretical possibilities into empirical ones'.<sup>6</sup> All of this has led Greenberg to see *Modernist art in evolutionary rather than in revolutionary terms*. His conservative vantage point was summed up as follows: 'I cannot insist enough that Modernism has never meant anything like a break with the past ... The making of pictures has been governed since pictures first began to be made, by all the norms I have mentioned'.<sup>7</sup>

The theory of Modernism put forth by Greenberg (which, as Donald Kuspit has noted, deserves undeniable credit for being the first sustained attempt by a US critic to fuse the immediate perception of art with intellectual responsibility for it)<sup>8</sup> does converge in several respects with the views of Auguste Comte, who first coined the term 'positivism'. Greenberg's insistence that we restrict our analysis to the supposedly self-evident givenness of brute phenomena ('Modernist art does not offer theoretical demonstrations ... [only] empirical ones,

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4 Greenberg 1993b [1960], pp. 85–93.

5 Greenberg 1993b [1960], p. 89.

6 Greenberg 1993b [1960], p. 91.

7 Greenberg 1993b [1960], p. 92.

8 Kuspit 1979a, p. 154.

he claims')<sup>9</sup> recalls Comte's definition of 'positive' knowledge as that which is supposedly immediately disclosed through experience, hence entails nothing 'hypothetical' or 'theoretical'. Furthermore, Greenberg's graduated and linear periodisation of culture in quite *monolithic* terms reminds us, paradoxically enough, of what Bertrand Russell called Comte's 'marked streak of idealist influence', namely his schematic view that history had advanced first beyond a 'theological phase' and then past a 'metaphysical phase' to arrive at the radiantly illuminated 'positive phase' of history wherein the dominant form of knowledge today is simply empirical truth uninflected by hypothetical considerations or subjective intrusions.<sup>10</sup>

The point here is not only to join Bertrand Russell in observing that there is no such thing as empirical knowledge that is entirely prior to all theoretical constitution, or merely to endorse Russell's criticism that 'in ruling out hypotheses in general as metaphysical, positivism misconstrues the nature of scientific explanation'.<sup>11</sup> Rather, we must also emphasise that – contrary to what Greenberg and numerous others have assumed – we do not need to choose between positivism and so-called 'dialectical materialism' (which is after all a term as well as a conceptual framework that Marx *never* used; the term 'dialectical materialism' was first used by Plekhanov and then subsequently sanctified as a closed teleological system by Stalin).<sup>12</sup> But the problem and method of historical materialism are other matters and we shall return to them via Karl Korsch later in this chapter. Before we do, it would be worth noting that the method of *historical materialism* (the approach Marx did use often) is an effective counter to the theoretical naiveté of positivism and to the empirical inadequacy of 'dialectical materialism' – both of which also suffer from a Eurocentric concept of historical progression.

The Eurocentrism of Greenberg's neo-positivist approach is obvious enough, as he himself has admitted. In the early 1980s, Greenberg argued the following:

Our Western culture has been in a singular position the past 150 years and maybe more. It's the only high urban culture – civilization – that's still quite alive ... one that's still developing, one in which change fulfils potentialities ... all the non-Western urban cultures seem now long decayed when not, as in most cases, altogether dead and gone.

9 Greenberg 1993b [1960], p. 92.

10 Russell 1959, pp. 274–5.

11 Ibid.

12 McLellan 1975, p. 84.

Western culture's present position is that its reach is earth-wide, that it's become the first global urban culture, one that intrudes everywhere and threatens to dominate everywhere ... It's not just because Western power, with its industrial and preindustrial technology has laid waste, and lays waste, to all other cultures ... In much greater part it was because of the perception of how much better, how much more alive, recent art from the West was than anything being done in traditional ways at home ... Now there is such a thing as truly international art, visual anyhow (including architecture). But it remains Western art, stays charged from and centered in the West ...

Just as the course of Greco-Roman culture wasn't, seemingly, affected by its spreading beyond its homeland or, on the other hand, even by incursions of barbarian outsiders, Western culture with its art seems to keep on evolving according to its own inner logic, its entelechy, uninfluenced at bottom by events at large.<sup>13</sup>

So, here we have an instructive paradox at the centre of Greenberg's approach. So-called 'medium purity', with its presumed autonomy from the society in which it is showcased, *is simultaneously celebrated for its 'purity' from any basic determination by society and yet also commended for its vital link to 'pure' Western values*. Nor is Greenberg willing to admit what Samir Amin and Stuart Hall, as well as others, have shown, namely, that '*Western values*' are not just Western in nature.<sup>14</sup>

As if to accommodate our objections, Greenberg admitted in this paper that 'Yes, I've been talking in Spenglerian terms',<sup>15</sup> because he was worried that Western art and culture were in a state of decline. Since they evidently were, world culture was in a precarious state, 'given that high art lives now only on Western terms'.<sup>16</sup> Far from being at odds with Greenberg's triumphalist view of Modernism from the late 1930s onward, this above assessment of Western art is an obvious corollary to how he has consistently and quite implausibly demoted if not *denied the non-Western and popular contributions to avant-garde art in general and to US post-war art in particular*. The conceptual framework sustaining this view (which we shall now examine more closely) helps us to explain Greenberg's unlikely odyssey *via positivism in large part* from being a

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13 Greenberg 1983, pp. 161–3.

14 Amin 1989, pp. 1–60.

15 Greenberg 1983, p. 163.

16 Greenberg 1983, p. 161.

quasi-Trotskyist to being a card-carrying McCarthyist to being a lofty defender of canonical Western values who is now holding the multicultural hordes at bay.

In an essay of 1967, entitled 'Complaints of an Art Critic', Greenberg shifts his stand so that he is less the unrelenting essentialist encountered above and more of a modern day *sensationist* along the lines of Edmund Burke and the eighteenth-century British Empiricists. He affects this shift evidently because he wishes both to make aesthetic judgments a matter of taste (rather than a result of rational inquiry) *and* also to claim quite paradoxically that quality in art is a matter of objective standards. His rather unlikely position goes as follows:

Esthetic judgments are given and contained in the immediate experience of art. They coincide with it; they are not arrived at afterwards through reflection or thought. Esthetic judgments are also *involuntary*: you can no more choose whether or not to like a work of art than you can choose to have sugar taste sweet or lemons sour. (Whether or not aesthetic judgments are honestly reported is another matter.)

That qualitative principles or norms are there somewhere, in subliminal operation, is certain; otherwise esthetic judgments would be purely subjective ... Yet these objective qualitative principles, such as they are, remain *hidden from discursive consciousness*: they cannot be defined or exhibited. This is why such a thing as a position or standpoint cannot be maintained in the judging of art.<sup>17</sup>

Because he ultimately ignored Immanuel Kant's warning in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that 'thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind'<sup>18</sup> (and also Merleau-Ponty's even more nuanced observation about sensory experience, namely, 'There is no vision without thought'),<sup>19</sup> Greenberg tried to reconcile taste and objectivity along neo-Burkian lines, with the claim that 'the objectivity of taste is probatively demonstrated in and through the presence of consensus *over time*'.<sup>20</sup> Thus, he concluded two things from this purported consensus among sensitive people throughout the world: 1) 'There's no explaining this durability ... except by the fact that taste is objective'; and 2) 'There are objective tests of taste; but they are utterly empirical'.<sup>21</sup>

17 Greenberg 1993b [1967], p. 265.

18 Kant 1781. This quotation by Kant is used as a point of departure in Kuspit's article, 'The Illusion of the Absolute in Abstract Art'.

19 Merleau-Ponty 1964a [1945], p. 19.

20 Greenberg 1973, p. 23.

21 Ibid.

All of these abovementioned premises underlying Greenberg's position are *pre-Kantian* in a primitive empiricist way (we must always distinguish between the necessity of empirical experience and the ideology of empiricism, as E.P. Thompson has noted).<sup>22</sup> As such, they presuppose an utterly untenable belief in a *non-institutionally mediated 'pure' experience that is non-projective (only passively receptive) and that is a non-subjective as well as pre-cognitive intuition of the innate properties of independent objects*. This self-serving theory employed by Greenberg is to be found in a more sustained form in Edmund Burke's 1757 treatise on the sublime – a treatise to which Kant would later take major exception along the road to his 'Copernican Revolution'. In his celebrated treatise, Burke posited a belief in immutable laws for the governance of taste that presupposed a faith in the uniformity of sensory experience in 'normal' people.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, when Burke wished to defend his view that the 'manner of perceiving external objects is in all men the same', he adduced as 'proof' an observation that Greenberg (whether wittingly or unwittingly) repeated almost verbatim: 'All men are agreed to call vinegar sour, honey sweet.'<sup>24</sup> If, then, we really are capable of objectively knowing the 'natural properties of things' and there is also a basic uniformity of sensory perception in so-called 'ordinary' people around the world, then what for Burke caused so much popular confusion over issues of 'quality' and 'standards'? His answer was that the differences of opinion resulted from a *secondary* intrusion by the domain of rational thought and the perplexing *second-guessing of critical thinking*, all of which opened the door to partisan ideological agendas at the expense of *the natural order of things* conveyed by 'pure experience' along with 'neutral opinion'.<sup>25</sup>

The implausibility of Greenberg's and Burke's putative 'universal consensus' surfaces again and again in the most obvious way when so-called 'empirical' experiences are presented. When in 1990, for example, Greenberg spoke of Jules Olitski as 'the greatest living painter' – a view that Greenberg *alone* maintains – Fuller demurred and Greenberg responded with: 'Look again ... [To say] my taste is better than yours – that's too provocative ... [But] I'll say in this instance I'm ahead of you, that's all'.<sup>26</sup> Yet Greenberg's effort at overwhelming us with the supposedly self-evident or tautological 'truth' of 'positive' knowledge is hardly successful here. This is the case because what he claims is hardly tautological in the technical sense used by the early Wittgenstein and by later positivists –

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22 Thompson 1978, p. 4.

23 Burke 1990 [1757], p. 13.

24 Ibid, p. 14.

25 Ibid, pp. 23 ff.

26 Greenberg and Fuller 1991, p. 23.

namely, as a proposition of which the contradictory is self-contradictory<sup>27</sup> – since Greenberg's self-congratulatory elevation of Olitski to the depths of his own singular view hardly approximates the clear and undeniable givenness about which 'positivists' talk.

Quite aside from these difficulties, there are other problems as well. For, as Donald Kuspit in his book-length critique has shown, with Greenberg's approach 'taste abolishes history in the very act of using it',<sup>28</sup> since no sooner have we been told that great art is *above* history than we are also told that only *through* history can we empirically confirm the purported 'universal consensus' about it throughout the ages and around the world.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, as Kuspit has noted, Greenberg, who claims that his model of self-criticism is Kantian in character 'does not realize that finality in any context is, in Kant's words, a *transcendental illusion*. To believe that one's investigation leads one to final reality [in art] is as absurd – [however] emotionally satisfying – as to believe that it leads to final purpose'.<sup>30</sup> As such, Greenberg obviously promotes a false universalism in which we in the West are easily reconciled with the presumed superiority of us and Western art, while this perception of the place of us and Western art is not so easily reconciled with the present *historical* consensus that exists among artists and intellectuals outside the West.

In fact, an excellent but hardly cited critique of positivism as an adequate basis for critical art history had already been written in 1928 by Mikhail Bakhtin and Pavel Medvedev (while Clement Greenberg was still a student at Syracuse University in upstate New York). In a magisterial piece entitled *The Formal Method in European Art Historical Scholarship*, these two Soviet authors wrote a determined assessment of the progressive lessons to be learned from the *formalism* (as they termed it) of Worringer, Riegl, Hildebrand, and Wölfflin.<sup>31</sup> In so doing, Bakhtin and Medvedev viewed this European formalism as a *generally* (but not always) progressive rejoinder to 'the insipid empiricism of positivism and the abstract disinterestedness of idealism'.<sup>32</sup> (Here it is important to note that Greenberg, who has always embraced *positivism*, has often denied being a formalist. Such is the case, for example, in his abovementioned essay of 1967, 'Complaints of an Art Critic'.)<sup>33</sup>

27 Russell 1959, p. 308.

28 Kuspit 1979a, p. 145.

29 Ibid.

30 Kuspit 1979a, p. 172.

31 Bakhtin and Medvedev 1985 [1928], pp. 41–53.

32 Burke 1990 [1757], p. 44.

33 Greenberg 1993b [1967], pp. 265–72.

Bakhtin and Medvedev maintained that European formalism's emphasis on the primacy of the constructive function of artworks over their imitative or reproductive functions would *necessarily* lead to a new understanding of the means of representation along with the modes of artistic production. Conversely, Greenberg has invariably focused on the consumption rather than on the production of art – on the way that it tastes rather than on the labour process whereby it was made. Furthermore, these two Russian Marxists *on the periphery of European culture* were quite impressed by the way that the new European formalism undermined Eurocentrism in the arts. Accordingly, they observed: 'Whole worlds of the new forms of Eastern art were opened up to the artistic consciousness' of Europe; and: 'In the process of assimilating these new extremely varied forms of "alien art", it was precisely the constructive aims of art that grew more and more clear'.<sup>34</sup> In conclusion, Bakhtin and Medvedev spoke of the *potential* lessons of this formalism for Marxists in a way that still stands as an incisive critique of Greenberg's position:

The problem of seeing occupies a very important place in European formalism ... [which] developed the problem of seeing as the [historical] problem of meaningful vision ... Here too the determining factor was the struggle with positivism, which distorted the problem and reduced the sensual quality to a physical and physiological element, juxtaposing the eye, like an abstract physiological camera, to the phenomena as an abstract physical quality. Thus [in] the 'history of art without names' ... the ideological center was merely transferred from the object of representation ... to the work's artistic construction itself.<sup>35</sup>

Nor should we forget that Adolf Hildebrand, one of the formalists they praised, wrote a critique of medium essentialism around 1890: 'Some have concluded that the principles of artistic form are dictated simply by the properties of the material used ... This confusion of the end with the means of art should be discredited once and for all'.<sup>36</sup>

Two more exemplary critiques of positivism must be noted here as well because of the way they demonstrate positivism's historical alliance with Western, especially US, imperialism, when it is applied to an analysis of culture along the lines defended by Greenberg. The first critique is by Karl Korsch, who is one

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<sup>34</sup> Bakhtin and Medvedev 1985 [1928], p. 42.

<sup>35</sup> Bakhtin and Medvedev 1985 [1928], pp. 49–51.

<sup>36</sup> Hildebrand 1978 [1893], p. 92.



of the most original proponents in the twentieth century of 'critical Marxism' as an alternative to so-called 'dialectical materialism'. Korsch, who had a noteworthy influence in the early 1920s on the founding of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, was the leader later in the 1920s of a Marxist study group in Berlin that included Bertolt Brecht. After moving to the US in the mid-1930s, Korsch then had a noteworthy interchange with art historian Meyer Schapiro, whose particular reading of Marx is much closer to the interpretation of Korsch *than to that of either Trotsky or Stalin*.<sup>37</sup>

In fact, the essay from which I am going to quote – Korsch's superb critique of the concept of history underpinning positivism *and also Stalinism* – was originally published in 1937 in a small journal entitled *Marxist Quarterly* – a journal which was in fact founded and edited by Meyer Schapiro.<sup>38</sup> It was in an earlier issue of the same journal in 1937 that Schapiro's own celebrated piece, 'The Nature of Abstract Art', had already been published.<sup>39</sup> In his article entitled 'Leading Principles of Marxism: A Restatement', Korsch pointed out the following:

[Marx] spoke of 'Positivism' and 'Comtism' as something to which he was 'thoroughly opposed to as a politician' and of which he had 'a very poor opinion as a man of science'. Marx's attitude is theoretically and historically well-founded ... The Marxist critique of the development concept of bourgeois social science starts from a recognition of the illusionary character of that 'so-called historical evolution' according to which '*the last stage [of history] regards the preceding stages as being only preliminary to itself and therefore can only look at them onesidely*'.

This critical consciousness [of Marx] breaks the magic spell of the metaphysical 'law' of evolution. From a valid a priori axiom, it is reduced to a working hypothesis which must be empirically verified in each [historical] case ... [Thus] Bourgeois society may contain the relations of earlier societies in a further developed form. It may [however] contain them as well in degenerate, stunted and travestied forms ... It likewise contains within itself the germs of future developments in present society, though by no means their complete determination. The false idealistic concept of evolution as applied by bourgeois social theorists is *closed*

37 Interview with Meyer Schapiro by author, Rawsonville, Vermont, 15 July 1992. For a solid overview of Korsch's life, see Paul Breines's *Introduction to Korsch*: 1972, pp. 3–10.

38 Korsch 1972, pp. 11–38; this essay first appeared as 'Leading Principles of Marxism: a Restatement' in *Marxist Quarterly*, 1, 3, October/December, 1937: 356–78.

39 Schapiro 1937, pp. 4–23.

on both sides, and in all past and future forms of society rediscovers only itself. The new, critical and a materialistic Marxist principle of development is, on the other hand, *open* on both sides. *Marx does not deal with Asiatic, Antique, or Feudal society, and still less with those primitive societies which preceded all written history, merely as 'preliminary stages' of contemporary society.*<sup>40</sup>

A related critique of positivism, which documents well its exploitative effects in the Third World, has been put forth by several of the leading Latin American philosophers of our time, namely, Leopoldo Zea and Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez of Mexico and Alejandro Serrano Caldera of Nicaragua. These thinkers have noted how positivism, capitalist modernisation, and local dictatorships have generally been interlinked in Latin American history. In his now classic critique, Leopoldo Zea has explicated how the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship was consistently justified ideologically by means of official public affirmations of positivism. One of its major apologists was Dr. Gabino Barredo, who was a friend and former student of August Comte.<sup>41</sup> In a revealing presentation of why the orderly and 'scientific' development of society must take precedence over the 'chaos' of popular participation in government, Barredo defended a starkly hierarchical, unrelievedly vertical configuration of political power with the claim that, 'Far from being incompatible with order, liberty consists, in all phenomena, both inorganic and organic, in submitting fully to the [evolutionary] laws which determine these phenomena'.<sup>42</sup>

For the Díaz dictatorship in Mexico as for the later Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua, a presumed 'law' of orderly development was the overwhelming concentration of wealth in the hands of those who understood the 'science' of economics. In turn, the stewards of the 'neutral' state required for maximum economic efficiency would thus realise that all-important social problems are 'technical' rather than 'ideological' in nature. These problems result from a mere shortage of technology that only Western capital and industry can remedy. Culturally, then, 'scientific' positivism in Latin America has led to the marginalisation of so-called 'non-scientific' art and culture (often in the trivialising form of exotic entertainment for adventuresome tourists). This in turn has entailed a denial of cultural resources to the majority of Latin America.

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40 Korsch 1972, p. 11 and pp. 34–5.

41 Zea 1966, pp. 221–6.

42 Zea 1966, p. 226.

Writing in response to the present 'crisis de la cultura' in Latin America, Nicaraguan philosopher Alejandro Serrano Caldera has noted that any resolution of this problem must be premised on two basic insights: 1) an understanding of the ideological underdevelopment along with economic dependency *forced* upon people of the Third World; *and* 2) the necessity of constructing an alternative critical vision that is fundamentally *anti-positivist*.<sup>43</sup> This ideological reconstitution in the face of imperialism has already begun to be suggested in the arts, he believes, such as in the novels of Gabriel García Márquez and in the paintings of Armando Morales, among others.<sup>44</sup> According to Serrano Caldera, *Cien Años de Soledad* features an *anti-positivist, non-linear concept of history* in '*un tiempo nuevo*'.<sup>45</sup> By treating history as a mythic force with multi-directional promises yet to unfold – which contradicts positivism's mono-dimensional ban on all 'hypothetical' knowledge – García Márquez has abrogated the technocratic version of the future with its 'tiempo positivista'.<sup>46</sup> Thus he, Armando Morales, and others are part of the larger project to reconquer the right to dream of society in new ways – ways that fly in the face of the current empirical data about Latin America.

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43 Caldera 1984, p. 35.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

## Aesthetics as Ethics in the Writings of Robert Motherwell and Meyer Schapiro

In 1940, Robert Motherwell moved to New York City in order to pursue graduate studies with Meyer Schapiro at Columbia University. Motherwell did so because he was highly impressed with Schapiro's article 'The Nature of Abstract Art', which had appeared in the *Marxist Quarterly* in 1937.<sup>1</sup> Even though Motherwell decided against taking a Ph.D. in art history and instead embarked upon what was to become a celebrated career as a practising artist, his admiration for Meyer Schapiro's analysis of art never waned. Indeed, the forceful stimulus of Schapiro's thought was explicitly acknowledged as well as implicitly employed throughout Motherwell's career.

In 1978 critic Thomas B. Hess wrote:

Meyer Schapiro always will have a special place in the history of art history, not only for his writings, which illuminate a field that includes the Romanesque and the Modern, the concepts of Marx with those of Freud, but also for the benevolent influence he has had on so many living painters and sculptors ... Best known and most frequently adduced in books is the Motherwell connection.<sup>2</sup>

Attesting to a complex relationship with Schapiro, while also providing a remarkable look at the forces that spawned Abstract Expressionism, is the very fine anthology of essays, *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell*, carefully edited by Stephanie Terenzio and published in 1992 by Oxford University Press.<sup>3</sup> The first part of this commentary will address the concepts of art and of Abstract Expressionism that surface from a careful reading of Motherwell's works, and examine how both were influenced in part by Schapiro, particu-

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1 See Raines and Thompson 1994, p. 5.

2 Hess 1978, pp. 6–7.

3 Terenzio 1992; Terenzio's excellent collection brings to six the number of anthologies to have been published by or on major members of the first generation of the New York School: Hans Hofmann (Weeks and Hayes 1967 [1948]); David Smith (McCoy 1973); Ad Reinhardt (Rose 1975); Willem de Kooning (Scrivani 1988); and Barnett Newman (John O'Neill 1990).

larly by his writings from the 1940s through the 1960s. Some of these have been republished in Schapiro's *Theory and Philosophy of Art*, the fourth volume of his selected papers, on which the second half of my commentary will concentrate.<sup>4</sup>

# I

At least five major themes emerge as you read Motherwell's essays: 1) the largely negative manner in which Abstract Expressionism should be defined; 2) the undeniable internationalism of this 'antimovement', which accounts for its commendable opposition to both nationalism and Eurocentrism, and hence also for its ongoing importance to artistic production in the Third World at present; 3) the alternative, even visionary, sense of community, which presupposed a process of profound structural change, that was envisioned, however indeterminately, by virtually every member of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists; 4) the consistent opposition to formalism, but not to the broader analysis of formal values, on the part of all of these artists; and 5) the peculiar emphasis in their art on the properties of the visual language, rather than on the 'nature' of the medium. This final point accounts for their clear distance from Greenbergian 'medium purity' and also for their elective affinity with Meyer Schapiro's multilateral approach to art.

All of these points command our admiration even as the art works produced by the New York School otherwise call for our constructive criticism. Such criticism would start with how these very impressive works are also haunted by the 'expressive fallacy' (or the belief in 'pure' spontaneity), attenuated at times by a recourse to antirhetorical rhetoric (or the problem of so-called 'unmediated' representation), generally marked by an implausible concept of human nature as something prior to society, and frequently checkmated by a voluntarist (or ultra-individualist) view of historical change (except of course for the relentlessly deterministic position of Reinhardt, who makes exactly the opposite mistake).

Just as William Seitz could say in his 1955 study of Abstract Expressionism that in one capacity or another Motherwell's influence 'as partisan analyst and spokesman and as editor ... was everywhere', so Motherwell provided, in four statements of 1949–51, not only the name 'New York School', but also the most sophisticated overview of a markedly fractious antimovement – an antimove-

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4 Schapiro 1994.

ment that, as outlined by Motherwell, included women as well as men.<sup>5</sup> In discussing the art of members of the New York School, Motherwell emphasised that their work was as much about negation as it was about affirmation, as much about dissidence as it was about consent.<sup>6</sup>

In 1949 Motherwell defined the motivation of the New York School as neither an act of escapism nor as one of evasion, but as a necessary, if also indirect, contestation of the existing order. Among the rudiments of this 'antidefinition' put forth by Motherwell was the contention that 'the abstractness of modern art has to do with how much an enlightened mind rejects of the contemporary social order.'<sup>7</sup> Later, in his 1950 talk 'The New York School', Motherwell elaborated on this position as follows:

It is easier to say some of the things the School of New York is not. Its painting is not interested in giving information, propaganda, description, or anything that might be called (to use words loosely) of practical use ...

I think that the art of the School of New York, like a great deal of modern art that is called 'art for art's sake', has social implications. These might be summarized under the general heading of protest ...

The rejection by the School of New York of prevailing ideologies – or its refusal to accept conventional positions as representative of man's real needs, basic wants, and desires ...

[T]he rejection of the lies and falsifications of modern Christian, feudal aristocratic, and bourgeois society, of the property-loving world that the Renaissance expressed, has led us, like many other modern artists, to affinities with the art of other cultures: Egypt and the ancient Mediterranean, Africa, the South Seas, and above all the Orient ...

Conventional painting [in the West] is a lie – not an imposture, but the product of a man who is a living lie ...

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5 'A Personal Expression', 19 March 1949, a lecture given at Central High School of Needle Trades in New York, published in Terenzio 1992, pp. 56–63; 'Reflections on Painting Now', 11 August 1949, a lecture given in Provincetown, Mass., published in Terenzio, pp. 65–70; 'The New York School', 27 October 1950, a talk Motherwell gave at the Mid-Western Conference of the College Art Association in Louisville, Kentucky, published in Terenzio 1992, pp. 76–81; and 'The New York School', a preface to *Seventeen Modern Painters* (a pamphlet that accompanied an exhibition of the same name at the Frank Perls Gallery in Beverly Hills), republished in Terenzio 1992, pp. 82–4. For the statement about women artists and the New York School, see the talk of that name published in Terenzio 1992, pp. 76–7.

6 Terenzio 1992, pp. 77–81.

7 Terenzio 1992, p. 61.

One can only guess, if there were something more deeply and humanly inspiring, at what might be, what all mankind might be capable of.<sup>8</sup>

As formulated by Motherwell, these critical attributes of the New York School correspond closely to what Meyer Schapiro was writing and presenting in public lectures during the 1940s and 1950s. In his extremely significant 1957 defence of Abstract Expressionism in particular and of modernism in general, Schapiro said: 'Abstraction implies then a criticism ... If the painter cannot celebrate many current values, it may be that these values are not worth celebrating'.<sup>9</sup> As such, Schapiro continued, modern painting 'helps to maintain the critical spirit and the ideals of creativeness ... which are indispensable to the life of our culture'.<sup>10</sup> Among the reasons for the critical import of Abstract Expressionism were its critiques of the established conventions of art 'developed for the most part in the West', so that non-Western art was increasingly seen (by progressive artists at least), 'as existing on the same plane of human creativeness and expression as "civilized" Western art'.<sup>11</sup>

This latter point was made somewhat differently in Schapiro's now legendary 1953 survey of different art-historical approaches, entitled simply 'Style', which appears in volume four of his selected papers.<sup>12</sup> In the section where he distinguishes the excesses of formalism from the necessity of formal analysis (while doing a balanced critique of Wölfflin's method), Schapiro grounds the recourse to non-Western formal components by artists like those of the New York School in a way that singles out the historical uniqueness of each visual tradition, thus disallowing any easy claims of 'universalism'. (Along these lines, and somewhat at odds with Reinhardt and a few of the Abstract Expressionists, Motherwell said in 1950 in 'The New York School': 'I believe all art to be historical, that there is no such thing as an eternal art'.)<sup>13</sup> Schapiro noted how both Western and non-Western art relate to communal or social values in markedly different terms and with widely varying degrees of alienation: 'What in primitive art belongs to an established world of collective beliefs and symbols arises in modern art as an individual expression ... Modern artists feel, nevertheless, a spiritual kinship with the primitive ... because of their ideal of frankness and

8 Terenzio 1992, pp. 77–81.

9 Schapiro 1957, p. 38 and p. 42.

10 Schapiro 1957, p. 42.

11 Schapiro 1957, p. 37.

12 Schapiro 1994 [1953], pp. 51–102.

13 Terenzio 1992, p. 79.

intensity of expression and their desire for a simpler life, with more effective participation of the artist in collective occasions than modern society allows'.<sup>14</sup>

The persistent thread of opposition by Motherwell and The New York School to ethnocentrism in its most hegemonic form, namely as Eurocentrism, also surfaced in a variety of other ways, for instance in their support for the civil rights movement that was emerging in the 1950s and in their activism from the early 1960s onward against American intervention in other countries.<sup>15</sup>

The admirable values and visionary views that led later to Motherwell's principled support of the civil rights movement here and abroad were already much in evidence in his 1949 paper 'Reflections on Painting Now'. In part of this essay Motherwell lamented the racist attitudes in the United States that were being encountered by Cuban painter Wifredo Lam: 'The conditions under which an artist exists in America are nearly unbearable; but so they are everywhere in modern times. Sunday last I had lunch in a fisherman's inn in Montauk ... with Wilfredo [sic] Lam, the Cuban and Parisian painter, who is half-Chinese, half-Negro; he has difficulty remaining in this country because of the Oriental quota; I know he is humiliated on occasion in New York, for example, in certain restaurants'.<sup>16</sup> From there Motherwell went on to speak of the community of progressive artists as a kind of haven from the ethnocentrism and divisiveness of the everyday world of the Cold War period. Yet the very nature of the artist-community's alternative values meant that the artists themselves were more marginal to ordinary life in the modern world. Lam himself wanted to know whether artists were 'always so "unwanted"'. To this question Motherwell responded as follows:

I replied that I supposed that artists were more wanted in the past when they spoke for the whole community ... [Yet] we modern artists constitute a community of sorts; part of what keeps me going, part of my mystique

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14 Schapiro 1994 [1953], p. 58.

15 See Craven, 'New Documents: The Unpublished F.B.I. Files on Meyer Schapiro, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, and Adolph Gottlieb' (Chapter 30 in this book). As Terenzio's fine chronology of Motherwell's life shows, the painter's career was exemplary for its support of national liberation movements in the Third World, which was life-long. Among the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements to which he was most connected were those in Algeria, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Vietnam. Motherwell's opposition to U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic led to government surveillance of his activities, something Craven discussed at length in *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent During McCarthy Period* (Craven 1999).

16 Terenzio 1992, p. 68.



is to work for this placeless community. Lam and I parted advising each other to keep working ... Until the structure of modern society is radically altered, these will continue to be the conditions under which modern artists create ... In so doing, one discovers who one is, or, more exactly, invents oneself. If no one did this, we would scarcely imagine of what a man is capable.<sup>17</sup>

Motherwell's series of paintings entitled *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, which extended from 1948 to 1991, served as a tribute to the leftist government in Spain (with which Lam had sided while he was in this country) that had been defeated and destroyed by fascism a decade earlier. In his 1959 essay for *Art News* on the Spanish painter Miró, Motherwell praised the painter's visionary socialist politics and decried 'Franco's gloomy, suppressed Spain'.<sup>18</sup>

About his own politics (which in the 1940s evidently gravitated from an unorthodox use of Marxism to anarchism, although the two positions clearly overlap on certain points), Motherwell made a fundamental observation when he discussed his relation to the *Spanish Elegies* in the following light:

I meant the word 'elegy' in the title. I was twenty-one in 1936, when the Spanish Civil War began ... The Spanish Civil War was even more to my generation than Vietnam was to be 30 years later to its generation, and should not be forgotten, even though *la guerre est finie*. For years after the series began, I was often mistaken for a Stalinist, though I think the logical political extension (and not that one need be logical: I hate dogma and rigidity) of extreme modernist individualism, as of native American *radicalism*, is a kind of anarchism ... [w]itness Thoreau or Whitman or Reinhardt.<sup>19</sup>

Like several of the other painters among the Abstract Expressionists who embraced a concept of the sublime and who were also anarchists (Newman, Rothko, and Gottlieb come to mind most readily),<sup>20</sup> Motherwell became associ-

17 Ibid.

18 Terenzio 1992, p. 115.

19 Diamonstein 1979, pp. 244–245. This is one of two omissions by Terenzio that should be added in any future editions of her anthology. The other is a group of passages on politics that Terenzio has eliminated from Motherwell's brilliant essay 'The Modern Painter's World' (originally published in *DYN* 1, no. 6 (November 1944): 9–14, reprinted, in abridged form, in her book on pp. 27–35).

20 For Motherwell's own interpretation of the sublime, see Terenzio 1992, pp. 51–3.

ated in the 1960s with *Dissent*, the democratic socialist journal for which Schapiro had long served as an editor.<sup>21</sup> Internationalism has always been a hallmark of anarchist thought, which is why Barnett Newman could in the 1940s declare that 'there is no art of nations, only of people'.<sup>22</sup> The antinationalism of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists, which has been misrepresented in many studies (particularly those by social historians of art), was a defining attribute of the New York School from very early on.

This is apparent in a letter from Motherwell to French art critic Christian Zervos (June 13, 1947), in which are given the views motivating the conception of *possibilities* (which was edited by Motherwell and Harold Rosenberg): 'Some of us artists are beginning a small review to combat the indifference to, and reaction against, modern art in the United States ... We are trying as hard as possible to make a magazine which is international in character, and in a moment in which the entire world is becoming chauvinistic, the task is not easy'.<sup>23</sup>

Such a position of antinationalism was unquestionably sustained throughout his career. In fact in May 1979 Motherwell even complained in the pages of *Art Journal* about the triumphalist view that American art since 1945 was 'the undisputed world champion' and thus was seldom exhibited with the works by artists of other countries from the same period.<sup>24</sup>

A last theme in his writings, formulated (in a 1946 piece that showed him to be a gifted writer as well as a gifted dialectician) as a kind of warning against two extremes, held first that 'the most common error among the wholehearted abstractionists nowadays is to mistake the medium for an end in itself'.<sup>25</sup> In the other direction, 'The surrealists erred in supposing that one can do without a medium'.<sup>26</sup>

From here Motherwell advanced in his 1950 essay on the New York School toward a corollary view of substantial significance to the Abstract Expressionists: '[M]odern emphasis on the language of art ... is not merely a matter of internal relations, of the so-called inherent properties of a medium. It is instead a sustained, systematic, stubborn, sensitive, and sensible effort to find an exact formulation of attitude toward the world as concretely experienced'.<sup>27</sup>

21 Schapiro was an editor of *Dissent* from 1954 until his death in 1996.

22 O'Neill and John, 1990, p. 73.

23 Terenzio 1992, p. 44.

24 Motherwell 1979, pp. 270–1; and quoted in Terenzio 1992, p. 234.

25 Terenzio 1992, p. 38.

26 Ibid.

27 Terenzio 1992, p. 79.

This statement and numerous others like it by Motherwell amount to nothing less than a wholesale refutation of Clement Greenberg's concept of modernism and of any claim that Greenberg's approach is adequate for analysing the art works by the first generation of Abstract Expressionists. (The small group of artists to which Greenberg's theory of modernism does apply includes primarily the Washington Colorfield School.) The way in which Motherwell so aptly outlined the avowed artistic intentions of the New York School – he pointed out, for example, that Rothko, who had 'quasi-Marxist feelings', was as 'contemptuous of formalism' as were the social realists<sup>28</sup> – corroborates what I claimed at the outset of my essay.

Motherwell's position converges as much with the views of Schapiro as it diverges from the views of Greenberg, which is to say, quite often. Nothing underscores more emphatically his proximity to Schapiro and his distance from Greenberg than does Motherwell's insistence on the linkage of aesthetics with ethics. Such was the claim he made in the 1949 statement, 'A Personal Expression', when he contended that '[a]esthetic decisions in the process of painting are not primarily aesthetic in origin but moral, and nowadays largely negative'.<sup>29</sup>

## II

All of these contentions about art find confirmation in the various essays about art theory that appear in volume four of Schapiro's collected writings. Each piece by Schapiro focuses on the densely mediated nature and comparably mediating role of art, which is both referential to life and yet not reducible to it precisely because as language or code art is a cultural construction. Simultaneously linked to life and functioning at a distinct syntactical remove from life, art is both a formative force or active agent in life and a particular manifestation of life. For Schapiro, as for Motherwell, art and life are asymmetrically and unevenly interrelated, while for Greenberg, the nondialectician, they are simply unrelated.

These correspondences between the concepts of art of Schapiro and Motherwell emerge in telling fashion throughout this new collection of well-known articles by Meyer Schapiro. His ground-breaking essay on semiotics (the merits and failings of which have been discussed by Margaret Iversen) deals with the

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28 Terenzio 1992, p. 199.

29 Terenzio 1992, p. 58.

conceptual ordering that goes along with the fictive representation of lived experience, all of which occurs through cultural practices that not only inflect that concrete experience but also abstractly shape it as well.<sup>30</sup> In many respects the essay on semiotics was an obvious extension of how since the early 1930s Schapiro addressed the internal structural logic of art works, on the one hand, while not neglecting their external significance in extra-aesthetic or historical terms, on the other.<sup>31</sup>

Nowhere does Schapiro deal with the mediating role of language more effectively than in his virtuoso essay on art and psychoanalysis, 'Freud and Leonardo: An Art Historical Study' (1956), which is unquestionably a landmark in the life of the discipline.<sup>32</sup> In a measured, even generous, critique of Freud's *Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci* (1910), which he terms a 'brilliant *jeu d'esprit*' that reveals the 'hand of a master', Schapiro does an impressive rereading of the one major extant statement by Leonardo about his childhood. Much of Freud's interpretation – that Leonardo was a latent homosexual with an almost superhuman ability to sublimate his sexual drives and all other instinctual energy into intellectual inquiry and artistic production – rested on something close to a literal reading of this passage. According to Leonardo, his earliest recollection from childhood was that of being in a cradle when a kite (a type of hawk, not a vulture as Freud erroneously presumed based on a mistranslation of this passage) flew up 'to me and opened my mouth with its tail and struck me many times with its tail inside my lips'.<sup>33</sup>

Although not treating this meaning as an actual event but as an adult fantasy referred back to childhood, Freud did of course see this imaginary story, *in almost unmediated fashion*, as a virtually direct disclosure of an unconscious desire associated with fellatio. Yet Schapiro, using an impressive philological analysis of this imaginative motif, shows it to be a densely mediated and quite impersonal literary trope of considerable antiquity. To quote Schapiro:

This fantasy about an incident of childhood as an omen of adult fortune or genius is no unique form, but an established literary pattern. Cicero, in his book *On Divination*, writes: 'When Midas, the famous king of Phrygia, was a child, ants filled his mouth with grains of wheat as he slept. It was predicted that he would be a very wealthy man, and so it turned out'. In

30 Iverson 1988 [1969], pp. 223–42.

31 For a more sustained look at Schapiro's approach, see Chapter 12.

32 Schapiro 1994 [1956], pp. 153–92.

33 Schapiro 1994 [1956], p. 154.

the next line, Cicero adds: 'While Plato was an infant asleep, in his cradle, bees settled on his lips and this was interpreted to mean he would have a rare sweetness of speech' ... We have then a series of traditional tales, known in Leonardo's time, which resemble his memory of the kite; they foretell a hero's future from an episode of his infancy.<sup>34</sup>

In Leonardo's case – particularly since this so-called 'recollection' occurred in the context of his scientific notes on aerodynamics, which were based on the observation of kites in flight – this conceit was supposed to function as a 'disclosure' through established literary discourse of Leonardo's future 'destiny' as the discoverer of the scientific laws of flight and as the producer of a flying machine.<sup>35</sup>

In a similar analysis that is equally insightful, Schapiro deftly amends two other claims by Freud: the belief that the compositional configuration employed in *The Virgin and Child and St. Anne* (1508–13) was unique to this painting by Leonardo and the assertion that depictions of St. Anne with the Madonna were rare, so that both of these features of this work revealed something singular about the biography of Leonardo, namely, his situation of supposedly having had two mothers.<sup>36</sup> By pointing out to the contrary that this type of composition was a staple of much High Renaissance art from this period and that the cult of St. Anne (which dated from only about a decade before Leonardo's painting of her) sanctioned numerous images that 'often show[ed] Mary sitting on the lap of Anne',<sup>37</sup> Schapiro demonstrated yet again that in both formal and iconographic terms this painting was dependent upon the respective languages employed to articulate a convention-laden and largely impersonal image with broad historical import in this epoch.

Accordingly, Schapiro shows that art cannot simply be reduced to biography, whether on the conscious or on the unconscious level, since there is no one-to-one relationship between art and life. Rather, art like life is densely *overdetermined* – to use a term coined by Freud, but not adequately employed in his study of Leonardo. Nonetheless, Schapiro was not ready either to write off psychoanalytic theory or to invalidate Freud's main thesis concerning Leonardo, since 'Freud's general account of psychological development and the unconscious processes is untouched by the possible misapplications to Leonardo'.<sup>38</sup>

34 Schapiro 1994 [1956], p. 161.

35 Schapiro 1994 [1956], pp. 161–2.

36 Schapiro 1994 [1956], pp. 166–76.

37 Schapiro 1994 [1956], p. 169.

38 Schapiro 1994 [1956], p. 187.

Instead, Schapiro concluded that anyone in the future using such an approach to art would 'need a fuller knowledge of Leonardo's life and art and of the culture of his time'.<sup>39</sup> Yet in registering this insight, Schapiro wrote, 'I do not mean to oppose historical or sociological explanations to psychological ones'.<sup>40</sup>

Some of the most stringent and at times even searing criticisms made by Schapiro in this collection of essays are to be found in his relentless dissection of 'Mr. Berenson's Values' (1961).<sup>41</sup> It is this essay on Berenson which helps us to appreciate how Schapiro, for all his emphasis on the internal logic of art, is sharply critical of anyone who would entirely disconnect art from life. Furthermore, his criticism of Berenson in fact applied with minor adjustments to the doctrinaire formalism practiced by Greenberg from the mid-1940s on.<sup>42</sup>

As Schapiro shows in this 1961 essay, Berenson's impatient and ill-informed opposition to modern art and to democratic socialism were but the flip-side of his inability to relate aesthetics to ethics in any meaningful way. About the jarring disjuncture in Berenson's professional life whereby a remarkable sensitivity to art objects co-existed with an appalling insensitivity to the plight of other people, Schapiro made some notably instructive observations. After pointing out that Berenson had grown up in poor circumstances, Schapiro noted that this legendary connoisseur of art had decided early on that poverty was simply something to be personally escaped, not something to be generally eradicated.<sup>43</sup> This decision led Berenson, for example, to dismiss his wife's sympathies for the Fabians' programme for social reform in the United Kingdom.

Consequently, Berenson's career aims became interrelated with his social aspirations. Happiness for him entailed a form of 'disinterested' aristocratic leisure – a form of leisure otherwise subjected to devastating criticism by Thorstein Veblen about this same time (and Veblen's critique, as Terenzio notes, was one that Motherwell subsequently used in 1955 in his classes at Hunter College [p. 298]). An alternative mode existed, however, even in Berenson's charmed circle of patrician friends at the turn of the century. This point Schapiro tartly noted when he wrote the following:

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39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Schapiro 1994 [1961], pp. 209–26.

42 Schapiro told me in 1992 that in the early 1960s he had written a critique of Greenberg's approach that ended up being 'so negative that I decided to withhold publishing it' (Interview, July 15, 1992, Rawsonville, Vermont).

43 Schapiro 1994 [1961], pp. 209–26.

For some passionate or tender souls who shared this way of life, it did not exclude a concern for the wretched state of most of humanity. Aesthetic feeling then could even be the starting-point of radical thought. But more often, in a view typical for the nineteenth century, the contrast of the cultured and the uncultured replaced the contrast of rich and poor, employer and worker, leaving the obvious inequalities untouched. Beauty was separated from the ethical, the civic ... Culture conceived in this way [as by Berenson] must lose its ties with common experience and the problems of mankind; it risks becoming empty and sterile.<sup>44</sup>

But, was Berenson's single-minded commitment to art enough to transport him to a rarefied realm divested of any vulgar links to the quotidian? Hardly. As Schapiro notes, 'Whatever he ... said about his personal philosophy, Berenson was not the pure aesthete he gave himself out to be ... [because] the use of Culture as commodity' was after all the price for Berenson's ticket to a richly moneyed elsewhere. Thus, '[b]usiness, a distasteful, indelicate subject, was the concealed plumbing of his House of Life ... [and any] admissions [about it] would have conflicted with the appearance of a sovereign gentleman above material cares'.<sup>45</sup>

Schapiro and Motherwell emphasised a different path, one that understood that aesthetics were related to ethics, albeit in a very complex manner. In his 1948 statement about the sublime, a signal declaration of the New York School, Motherwell advanced a position that is not unexpected from a former student of Meyer Schapiro: 'Suppose that we assume that, despite defaults and confusions, modern art succeeded in ridding us of the costumes of the past, of kings and queens and the glory of conquerors and politicians and mountains, rhetoric and the grand, that it became, though only understood by a minority, a people's art, a peculiarly modern humanism, that its tactics in relation to the general human situation were those of gentle, strong and humane men defending their values with intelligence and ingenuity against the property-loving world ... [O]ne might say that it is only the most inhuman professions in modern society that permit the agent to behave nicely in everyday life and to regard the world with a merry and well-glassed eye'.<sup>46</sup>

To a greater extent than many others in the art world, both Motherwell and Schapiro attempted to avoid the dual problems at the intersection of art and

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44 Schapiro 1994 [1961], pp. 222–3.

45 Schapiro 1994 [1961], p. 224.

46 Terenzio 1992, p. 53.

society that await all of us. These pitfalls were aptly summarised by a Latin American critic who noted a few years ago that to confuse art with social concerns is one mistake, while to separate art from social concerns is another mistake.<sup>47</sup>

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47 Mosquera 1985, p. 45.



**PART 3**

***Critical Theory***





## Prerequisites for a New Criticism

As Novalis once stated, art works are not so much good or bad, as they are more or less limited. While the uncircumscribed expansiveness of art is often affirmed in our post-Duchampian period, the constrictive premises of most critics reaffirm old aesthetic boundaries. At present, new methodologies in criticism must address the open-ended, but hardly a-historical, character of art and the artificially imposed limits of modernism, as well as those of much purported post-modernism. The problem is less the formalist orientation of modernism, however, than the epistemological basis for this formalism, namely, the empirical approach modernism shares with most other contemporary methodologies. Because of its empirical concentration on art forms to the exclusion of factors which precede and later constitute these forms, modernism is incapable of dealing with the perceptual field, the social context, the ideological implications, and the unconscious associations which necessarily accompany creation or perception of artistic form. By naively assuming that description can be neutral or experience pure (to quote Roger Fry), a basic presupposition of modernism is always that in describing the art object, the critic has somehow ‘objectively’ approached it – a position which is obviously self-refuting because it inevitably bears witness to the social pretensions and conceptual framework of those who support it.

Ironically, the formalist insistence on medium self-criticism is flawed by a debilitating paradox, since this position lacks self-criticism about its own relationship to history. A much more incisive and expansive approach was enunciated by Merleau-Ponty, who contended that the meaning of art involves a continued questioning of art’s general use, not just a very limited questioning of a particular medium’s usage: in other words, a concern with the limits of art, rather than a preoccupation with the limits of a medium.<sup>1</sup> The mere acceptance of medium self-criticism as an a priori aim excludes a more profound self-criticism concerning the nature of art – a failing which shows that the modernist notion of self-criticism is assumed to be beyond criticism. The most important avant-garde art, as opposed to modernist art, has called into question the limitations of our concept of art, not just the limitations of media within this concept of art. While avant-garde art has projected a new *Weltan-*

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1 Merleau-Ponty 1964 [1945], p. 13.

*schauung* for life through new styles in art, modernist art has presented new styles for art which support the established order, if only because they do not contest it.<sup>2</sup> The avant-garde tendency has been realised, for example, in the readymades of Duchamp, in the anti-art of the Dadaists, and in the 'dematerialisation' of objects from the 1960s till the present. All of this art has reacted against the physical limits of art by expanding it conceptually, thus disclosing the stultifying narrowness of strictly formal concerns.

Like Marx, who spoke of the end of philosophy when the difference between what is and what should be is resolved, avant-garde artists have advocated the transcendence of art for a comparable reason, namely, life as art. As Adorno has noted, however, philosophy remains because it has yet to be realised; the current situation necessitates critical theory more than ever.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, avant-garde art remains unintelligible merely in itself because attempts to establish a new culture with which it would be synonymous have fallen short. Just as philosophy has been condemned to a rigorous self-criticism concerning its social pertinence, so avant-garde art has entailed a rigorous re-assessment of art's conventional use and its present misuse. Consequently, a metacritical dimension concerning uncertainty about its own application must also be part of any new methodology in criticism for dealing with issues raised by the avant-garde.

A refutation of the narrow limitations of modernist criticism does not result in the disavowal of any aesthetic limits and the dissolution of all 'objectivity,' or rather trans-subjectivity, with regard to artistic meaning. Critical discourse cannot, however, be restricted to the methodological inadequacies of empirical-based modernism and post-modernism which include such archaic dichotomies as: form vs. content, quality vs. experience, objectivity vs. subjectivity, perceiver vs. perceived, empiricism vs. rationalism, consciousness vs. unconsciousness, and so forth. All of these antinomies give rise to a clarity that obscures. By establishing lines of demarcation that allow the clean separation of one category from the other, this position also leads to the suppression of one by the other when it is assumed that one can be known aside from the other. Yet such an assumption concerning perceiver vs. perceived, subjectivity vs. objectivity, etc. assumes what it cannot plausibly achieve, namely, an a-contextual knowledge of each, an awareness of one completely independent of the other. Presumed disconnections such as these lead to positivism, with

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2 Editor's note: For a more extensive discussion concerning the differences between avant-garde art and modernist art, see David Craven's review of Marcuse 1978 (Chapter 16 of this book).

3 Adorno 1967, pp. 1–5.

its apotheosis of the isolated particular. Certainly, it is hardly by chance that Greenberg would note connections between modernism and positivism or that logical positivists would accept as truthful only what is said to be 'empirically verifiable'.<sup>4</sup>

Duchamp's readymades have had significant consequences for modernism and positivism, because empiricism treats all art as readymade, that is, cut off from the circumstances that helped make it. By reducing art to 'pure' choice, however, the readymades of Duchamp returned art even more to the impurity of the complex situation that fostered and consummated such choices. Contrary to the standard view, Duchamp's conception of the readymade did not dissolve art into unremitting subjectivity or unending relativity. Rather, Duchamp's disclosure that *any object can, within a certain context, become art shows that any object which is art has become so by means of a particular historical context*. Thus, a Duchamp readymade underscores the undeniable, yet often recognised contextuality of art, without in any way reducing art to a predetermined notion of that context. The facile dismissal of history by formalist art criticism is not replaced by an implausible reduction of art to a mere reflection of history – a situation in which predetermined formal values are superseded by a deterministic evaluation of form.

At present a connection to modernism, often unintentional, continues to undermine many attempts at new methodologies in art criticism. The post-modernism of Douglas Davis accepts the bifurcation of form and content by opting for the latter when counteracting the formalism of modernism, while the postminimalist essays of Robert Pincus-Witten are tacitly premised on an empirically given formal value that prompts such positivistic distinctions as 'epistemologic' art versus 'ontologic' art.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, the subjectivism of critics like Nancy Marmer or Carter Ratcliff leaves the modernist claim of objectivity intact by presuming to approach art in an antithetical way, namely, on the basis of sensibility. Furthermore, the critical failings of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde – in particular, their unacknowledged belief in a neutral object against which purely subjective responses or 'impressions of the soul' could be gauged – are repeated in the 'autotelic' criticism advocated by Marmer.<sup>6</sup> 'Pure' sensibility is merely substituted for 'pure' form when the response to modernism's misplaced objectivity is a misconceived subjectivity. Yet even if pure sensibility were possible, it would be unintelligible. To contend that

4 Greenberg 1961 [1948], p. 139; and Ayer 1952, p. 5.

5 For an examination of both the strengths and weaknesses of postminimalism by Robert Pincus-Witten, see Kuspit 1979b, pp. 298–300.

6 Marmer 1979, pp. 69–71.

art criticism expresses only a private response is to demote it to art appreciation – an appreciation that solipsistically reaffirms the uncritical feelings of the self as the one thing knowable. Autotelic criticism is self-refuting in another way as well. To argue that ‘[a]ll any of us has is our subjective experience of the object’ is to imply what is explicitly denied, because an experience of the object is necessary to show that personal experience has no connection with such an experience of the object. The result of autotelic criticism as well as of ‘diaristic’ and other subjectivist criticism, is an elegant, sometimes perceptive, often pleasurable recidivism which simply does not address the most profound issues facing anyone concerned with *new*, as opposed to *neo*-, *methodologies*.

A prerequisite for a new methodology is not a commonplace denunciation of formalism, but the very uncommon move of breaking with the epistemological basis of modernism, in particular, the assumption that art forms are known to be intrinsically meaningful in some a-social sense. A major rupture with the epistemological premises of modernism has been achieved in the phenomenological approach used in some essays by Donald Kuspit. Conversely, Michael Fried’s unsuccessful efforts to use phenomenology have resulted in a phenomenalism bound to his old formalism. Another new methodology is related to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and has appeared in some interpretations by John Berger, Donald Kuspit, and Annette Michelson. Aside from these two approaches (the two on which this article will concentrate), other new methodologies in art criticism have been used: the semiotic framework of Roland Barthes (though it should be emphasised that many semiotic studies have merely resulted in a new formalism, as Jean-Paul Sartre once noted); the post-structuralist perspectives of Gilles Deleuze; and the psychoanalytic approach of Lacan as used by film critics like Maureen Turim. However divergent all these critics and their methodologies might be in certain respects, they all share a fundamental progression beyond the supposedly objective limits of modernism. They all call into question the presuppositions of formalism: its empirical basis, its ideological bias.

As is obvious, all of these methodologies are not necessarily recent ones, although their use in art criticism is a new development in most respects. These methodologies remain new, however, because their refutation of conventional art criticism has yet to be assimilated by either the art world or society at large. As long as these methodologies remain unassimilated it will be impossible to go beyond them historically, which would amount to rendering them *passé*. They are and will remain *new* as long as the radicality of their critiques is not addressed by the established order. Transcendence of these new methodologies must go through, not around them, yet to go through them will entail a

contextual awareness and a stringent self-criticism unknown to any other contemporary critical approaches which might be considered alternatives.

A break with the empirical closure of modernist criticism is now a prerequisite for developing a new methodology for several other reasons, not the last of which is that in the psychology of perception the empirical position has long been inadequate. From the first critiques of empiricism by Gestalt psychology through the brilliant disclosures of Merleau-Ponty, it has been observed that – contrary to the empirical assumption – we do not see specific things prior to the context in which we encounter them and aside from the different perspectives with which we necessarily approach them. Far from just perceiving isolated things, we always see things in relationship to each other and ourselves *within* a perceptual field that is as much a constitutive act as an act of recognition, with neither occurring aside from the other. Furthermore, any art criticism which limits itself to empirical analysis cannot escape the critique of scientism by the early Georg Lukács, who showed that the empirical method so effective in studying nature is an ideological weapon of the established order when this method is applied to social products like art.<sup>7</sup> A basic assumption of formalism and of much so-called post-formalism is that the concrete can be isolated within empirical ‘facts’ of history, outside the social system as a whole. By using an empirical description of the art object, however, criticism fails to give a concrete analysis, namely, an analysis which not only focuses on the art object but necessarily goes beyond it to the specific yet complex process which brought the object into being. A concrete analysis is inextricably linked to synthetic thinking, while an empirical approach never goes beyond analytic description. A concrete analysis is both self-referential and contextually referential, yet empirical analysis is merely self-referential, without recognising that the resulting isolation (even if it were possible) would render the empirical particular incomprehensible. The empirical closure of formalism reifies the subjective act of creation, the process of perception, the politically emancipatory aspects of art, and the nonsublimated manifestations of eros – all of which await critical consummation, not just passive description.

Significantly, the implausibility of formalism and empiricism have become aesthetic concerns of several contemporary artists, whose works I shall term ‘Metaconceptual’. Artists like Sol Le Witt and Joseph Kosuth used Conceptual Art to refocus attention from the formal components of art to the aesthetic concepts which precede these forms. Metaconceptual artists like Hans Haacke and Daniel Buren have redirected emphasis from the concepts realised as forms to

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7 Lukács 1971b, p. 50.

the social contexts and perceptual realms which not only precede the aesthetic concepts but also continually alter their reception. The Conceptual Artist's primacy of idea has given way to the Metaconceptual artist's awareness of the priority of context. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Metaconceptualists have made works that appear formally mute and conceptually unobtrusive so that the very context of the art work – perceptually and socially – has been the central content of the work. As Daniel Buren recently stated in *Reboundings*, a book of great importance: 'the place of the art work would seem to be the art work itself ... [thus] we are witnessing an increasingly evident loss of autonomy on the part of the art work, if it has ever had any, that is ... that notorious autonomy of the art work ... of which the systematic *white-washing of all [museum] walls is the last avatar*'.<sup>8</sup> By forcing viewers to see the modes of social appropriation whereby supposedly independent art is made to serve the present system, Hans Haacke's work has divulged perceptual assumptions, ideological concerns, and social expectations which are inextricably connected to any experience of art. Like Buren and other Metaconceptualists, Haacke has created an art which, in debunking modernism, necessitates a break with an empirical closure by new critics who are critically self-reflexive and socially committed. Only new methodologies, such as those based on phenomenology and critical theory, are in a position to critique the art of Haacke and Buren, since the refutation of conventional criticism is a significant achievement of Metaconceptualism.

A major precursor of the Metaconceptual artists, as Haacke has stated, was Marcel Duchamp. Even before Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes proclaimed the death of the author in favour of the reader, Duchamp noted the ascendancy of the viewer over the artist. In a lecture entitled 'The Creative Act', for example, Duchamp spoke of the 'art coefficient' as 'an arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed'.<sup>9</sup> Evincing a radical self-criticism unequalled by most artists prior to Haacke and Buren, Duchamp stated: 'In the last analysis, the artist may shout from all the rooftops that he is a genius; he will have to wait for the verdict of the spectator in order that his declaration take a social value ... the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act'.<sup>10</sup>

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8 Buren 1977, p. 15, p. 18 and p. 47.

9 Duchamp [1957] in Battcock 1973, p. 48.

10 Duchamp [1957] in Battcock 1973, pp. 47–8.



A significant article for new methodologies was one by Donald Kuspit in the January 1974 issue of *Artforum*. Entitled 'A Phenomenological Approach to Artistic Intention', Kuspit's essay addressed the problem of regrounding art criticism on a more self-critical basis, thus counteracting the presumed self-evidence of modernist criticism. To reaffirm the importance of artistic intent while not confusing it with artistic realisation, as well as to reacknowledge a concern with the presuppositions underlying *all* art criticism, Kuspit posited an art criticism which would also be self-criticism. Starting with a 'phenomenological disconnexion' (or 'transcendental doubt') derived from Husserl, Kuspit noted that even to conceive art as perceived form is to place an *a priori* value on it. The desire for an approach to art devoid of any preconceptions and involving only 'taste' is itself a preconception characteristic of a certain period in history.

A need for greater critical rigour was necessitated by several things, in particular what Kuspit and others have termed the phenomenon of 'Warholism', namely, an intentionally impersonal art so seemingly cool and uncommitted that critics who confront it must divulge the nature of their commitment and the personal character of their responses.<sup>11</sup> Warholism, by its reticence, forced the critic to speak even louder. The resulting crisis in criticism undermined not only the 'neutrality' of formalist modernism, but also that of post-formalist critics like Max Kozloff and Leo Steinberg. Warholism forced critics to face the intersection of art and pop society, especially the class induced cleavage of high and low culture, and it exposed notions of taste (whether formalist or post-formalist) for what they generally are: disguised forms of prejudice which censor any broader discourse on art and criticism. In view of this development and in spite of the fact that it is now very good taste, indeed *au courant*, to like Pop Art and Minimalism, Kuspit called for a new critical approach which would explicitly respond to the self-revelatory dimension of criticism underscored by Warholism. He discussed how the contextuality of art and the auto-definition of the critic must lead the perceiver to 'subjectivity in pursuit of its own essence'.<sup>12</sup>

As Kuspit noted, even Steinberg and Kozloff merely confronted the uncertainty caused by Warholism as a general problem, rather than as a new form of uncertainty. Yet Warholism placed spectators in the position whereby they could no longer take for granted that they were seeing and attending to 'art' let alone that there was a unique logic – an unequivocal 'organising concept' –

11 Kuspit 1974, pp. 46–54. Kozloff had earlier used the term 'Warholism' in his essay 'Critical Schizophrenia and the Intentionalist Method' (Kozloff 1969, pp. 301–12).

12 Kuspit 1974, p. 46.

to its execution. Significantly, Kuspit went on to consider Warholism a form of *ressentiment*. As described by Nietzsche, *ressentiment* entails uncertainty about the ground of existence which ends in oppositionism for its own sake rather than in an opposition for the sake of change which, if successful, would eliminate the reasons for oppositionism. Only when it produces values of its own instead of attacking the values which engender opposition does *ressentiment* triumph. (An example of this sensibility is Duchamp's remark that 'The only refutation is indifference'). *Ressentiment* is a sustained process of inversion which glories in the strengths of its own weaknesses, as is the case with Pop Art in general and with Andy Warhol in particular. By its very indifference, Warholistic art has taken its revenge on formalism.

According to Kuspit, critics should deal with aesthetic *ressentiment* in one of two ways. They can either treat Warholism as a form of 'anti-art' or, and this was Kuspit's choice, they can use Warholism as part of a dialectic wherein the artist's negativity is assimilated by the critic as a positive weapon in the struggle against the false consciousness which blurs social conflict. Consequently, Kuspit stated:

What the artist cannot do, the critic must: the modernist critic must become conscious of his intentionality in and for itself, not simply as it relates to art ... He must not, in the end, reduce Warholism to another wrinkle in the art game, another artistic strategy, as Kozloff reactionarily does. Instead, he must understand that it affords an unexpected opportunity for a more telling consciousness, and that perhaps it indicates art's own call to be rescued from itself for the sake of life.<sup>13</sup>

After having dealt with Pop Art's intentionality – and here 'intentionality' should be understood as intention in a broad contextual sense involving the conscious projection and unconscious injection of social as well as personal concerns – Kuspit employed a different methodology to deal with the social realisation and aesthetic constitution of Pop Art. In 'Pop Art: A Reactionary Realism' (*Art Journal*, Fall 1976), Kuspit used an approach indebted to the Critical Theory of Adorno and the Frankfurt School. As such, he did a critique of how Pop Art, unintentionally or otherwise, reinforces the 'standardisation of consciousness' through its use of commodity fetishism. Instead of debunking media clichés and capitalist commodification, Pop Art gives them an aesthetic aura. As in advertising, Pop Art seems to turn things into signs of themselves,

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<sup>13</sup> Kuspit 1974, p. 52.

which is a major way of hiding the social values these things otherwise signify. The mass media world appears tautologous with the 'real' world, as if no other social alternatives are 'really' conceivable. Mass media images, and the system they represent, go from being infinitely reproducible to inescapably present. Thus, as Kuspit notes, Pop Art is reactionary insofar as it is viewed as being realistic.<sup>14</sup>

While Kuspit has approached art through new methodologies based on phenomenology and Critical Theory, other critics have attempted comparable methodological shifts. In the January 1979 issue of *Oppositions*, Rosalind Krauss used a phenomenological framework to deal with Minimal Art. Although her use of phenomenology was neither as expansive nor as incisive as Kuspit's, Krauss did register some significant insights. In discussing Frank Stella's early paintings, such as *Die Fahne Hoch*, Krauss argued that much of their significance does not reside in the reduction of artistic form or meaning to some 'essential' or 'minimal' core. Rather, she noted that these works make meaning itself a function of the external and the public, as well as a result of space that signifies neither a priori givens nor the privacy of intention. Thus, Stella's elimination of illusionism and overt expressivity was construed by Krauss to be an effort at relocating meaning within the conventions of public space, so that the work is not thought to be 'constituted prior to its contact with the space of the world'.<sup>15</sup> After Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the self, its contextual character and its continual intersection with the other, Krauss called Robert Morris's three L-beams cognates for this 'naked dependence of intention and meaning upon the body as it surfaces into the world ... the self understood, that is, only in experience'.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Krauss perceptively observed that other discussions of Minimal Art involved a latent form of Cartesianism and a misuse of Gestalt psychology. In these conventional critiques the 'gestalt seems to be interpreted as an immutable, ideal unit that persists beyond the particulars of experience',<sup>17</sup> as if the meaning of the art were not arrived at *through* perceptual encounters continually being qualified anew. *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (1977), a recent book by Krauss, features an extension of this phenomenological approach to Minimalism. In noting that Minimalists have attempted to refute the uniqueness, the privacy, and the inaccessibility of experience, Krauss discusses the way in which the later Wittgenstein denied the existence of a private

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14 Kuspit 1976, pp. 31–8.

15 Krauss 1974, p. 69.

16 Krauss 1974, p. 66.

17 Krauss 1974, p. 69. An important exception is an article by Kuspit: 'The Art of Reductionism' (Kuspit 1972, pp. 21–7).

language because the meaning of a word is its use, a use that involves public interchange. She contends that this analogy with language helps us to understand an important aim of Minimalism, namely, its re-evaluation of the *source* of artistic meaning rather than any denial of meaning to art: 'They are asking that meaning be seen as arising from – to continue the analogy with language – a public, rather than a private space'.<sup>18</sup>

Prior to Kuspit and Krauss, a phenomenological approach to art was used only a few times, with the essays by Merleau-Ponty and Gaston Bachelard being the most impressive examples. In most other articles, such as Robert Klein's 'Modern Painting and Phenomenology' (1963), this methodology is used with far less success. Klein's art criticism is undermined by a naïvely Husserlian view of phenomenology. In trying to discover the 'pure' intentionality of modern painting, he merely suppresses the 'impure' (because socially oriented) intentions of artists like Mondrian and Léger – all in the name of a totally self-referential art these painters neither intended nor achieved.<sup>19</sup> In keeping with Husserl and at odds with Merleau-Ponty, Klein posits the possibility of knowing 'pure' intentionality even though the basis of phenomenology – its *epoché*, or suspension, of a priori givens – would preclude the assumption beforehand that knowing 'pure' intentionality is possible. Following Husserl, Klein merely suspends absolute presumptions concerning knowledge of the thing perceived, but not of the act of perceiving. Thus, he does not avoid Husserl's unacknowledged a priorism – the belief that you can know perception apart from the context in which you perceive – which, as Merleau-Ponty has shown, is merely a new form of idealism that does not recognise itself.

Klein's contention that the 'debut of modern art' is marked by the end of external 'reference', whether real or ideal, is not unlike the formalist doctrine of 'pure' form. Modern art has not been characterised by an end to external references, however, but by an end to predetermined references; which means that references are arrived at *through* the process of artistic creation and during the process of spectative constitution. Consequently, Klein mistakenly bases his position on the view that 'Merleau-Ponty has proposed the Husserlian image (of course, his own as well) of Cézanne as the painter of perception rather than that of the perceived'.<sup>20</sup> This interpretation misconstrues Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, not to mention his view of Cézanne. By recognising the contextuality of all perception, Merleau-Ponty refused to

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18 Krauss 1977, p. 262.

19 Klein 1979, p. 193.

20 Klein 1979, p. 186.

posit pure perceptual acts and purely perceived objects. Thus, he observed that Cézanne painted the perceptual process as well as what was perceived by means of it, with neither being known purely aside from the other. Cézanne's significance resided, for Merleau-Ponty, as much in his self-awareness of how he constituted nature as in how he painted nature as being constituted.<sup>21</sup>

The untenability of Klein's phenomenological approach is most obvious, however, when he goes from viewing modern art as completely self-referential to implying that it is self-conceived. A *reductio ad absurdum* results in which Klein implies, through never explicitly states, that modern art is without any connection to the artist who made it, to the situation in which it was made. An example of Klein's tacit personification of the art object is his statement: 'A painting that has carried out its phenomenological reduction finally comes to itself, to its own aesthetic truth ... the work can measure itself only against itself; criticism is no longer possible'.<sup>22</sup> Klein's unacknowledged assumptions led him from a view of art as 'pure' reference to a notion of art as purified even of artists, and paradoxically of the intentionality with which phenomenology is concerned. By recognising and dealing with Husserl's flaws, Kuspit avoided Klein's shortcomings when he noted in his phenomenological approach to Warholism: 'Art's paradox is that it can never be self-grounding ... [because] artistic intention is always self-transcending, and as such grounding itself in the possibilities of human existence'.<sup>23</sup>

Klein's uncritical use of Husserl's phenomenology resulted in a notion of 'pure' art that is connected to the formalist belief in 'pure' form. Because he failed to recognise the weaknesses of Husserl's phenomenology, Klein did not really profit from its strengths. In contrast, Kuspit did address the methodological contradictions between Husserl's call for a phenomenological reduction – a suspension of the absolutely knowable in favor of apodictic experience – and Husserl's irreconcilable belief in the possibility of an eidetic reduction – a knowledge of absolute or 'pure' experience which in turn would lead to a 'pure' understanding of cognition. This hidden a priorism of Husserl was avoided by Kuspit, who did not succumb to the idealism which Klein never escaped. With Klein, the use of a new methodology did not lead to any profound new insights, so that his position had a passing connection with formalist modernism.

21 Merleau-Ponty 1964 [1945], pp. 9–25. After having described how Cézanne discovered the 'lived perspective', Merleau-Ponty added '[n]or did Cézanne neglect the physiognomy of objects and faces: he simply wanted to capture it emerging from the color' (p. 15).

22 Klein 1979, pp. 190–1.

23 Kuspit 1974, p. 53.

A more recent misuse of phenomenology in an effort to arrive at a new methodology is Michael Fried's article on Courbet (*Glyph*, 1978). Involving analysis with 'an existential-phenomenological tenor', Fried's article is based on the view that Courbet's assertive use of 'apparent nearness', semi-consciousness, and other traits deals with the 'lived body'.<sup>24</sup> Even if he were correct to say that Courbet's paintings feature a unique relationship of perceiver to perceived, Fried's characterisation of the 'lived body' as something objectively depicted would still be utterly implausible. The 'lived body' is, as Merleau-Ponty has written, a nexus of meanings and a perceptual ingress. Hence, it is known as a matrix of action but not as an objective setting.<sup>25</sup> By confusing the physical self-consciousness in Courbet's paintings with the 'bodily awareness' of the 'lived body', Fried also fails to acknowledge that 'bodily awareness' is only one aspect of the 'lived body', which, because it can hardly be circumscribed, can never be empirically described. His interpretation has methodological flaws which make it phenomenalist (or empiricist), rather than phenomenological in tenor. A misuse, or perhaps a disuse, of phenomenology occurs because he seeks the 'essential motivation', in a very narrow sense, of a complex and open-ended art. In addition to this reductive aim, Fried's position is based on an implausible notion of intentionality from a phenomenological viewpoint. Since he goes from noting that intention and intentionality are not synonymous to assuming that they are necessarily different, Fried delimits the contextual location of Courbet's art to a facile stylistic evolution that is all but independent of the social context in which it was created. As Merleau-Ponty said of Husserl's 'transcendental phenomenology', so we can observe of Fried's immanent phenomenism: 'The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction'.<sup>26</sup>

As all of these attempts at a new methodology show, the oft-announced break with modernist criticism is seldom achieved. Intended uses of new methodological frameworks by no means automatically lead to new criticism or original insights. At present, a critical methodology is only as effective as it is concretely grounded and self-consciously applied. Against the purportedly intrinsic worth of modernist criticism, we cannot respond by claiming essential merits for any new methodology, aside from the way it is used, and in light of the issues with which it deals. This hardly means that all methodologies are equal, but rather that any incisive criticism must also be self-criticism. The critic must

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24 Fried 1978, pp. 85–130.

25 Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. 104.

26 Merleau-Ponty 1962, p. xiv.

be aware of his own perceptual presuppositions and ideological assumptions, because no critic operates without them and the most profound critic operates with them by means of a self-reflexive turn.

## Herbert Marcuse on Aesthetics

However one dimensional its effects, reification is a multifaceted problem.<sup>1</sup> The abortive standardisation of consciousness explicitly promoted by the capitalist system is implicitly fostered by many statements about art conceived to oppose it. Orthodox Marxist aestheticians, such as the Zhdanovists or the later Lukács, hypostatise art by reducing the creative impulse to a prescribed reflex, thus endorsing a constriction of subjectivity and a restriction of any complex interchange between artist and audience, art and ambience. All art has a political dimension, yet is not reducible to it, whereas propaganda extends to little else. By confusing the political dimension of art with the aesthetic dimension of propaganda, conventional Marxists show an unawareness that radical change must be grounded in the subjective self of individual consciousness and unconsciousness. Revolutionary views cannot be dictated from above in the form of tautologies, as if art were merely a matter of 'objective' intentionality. The significance of *The Aesthetic Dimension* resides largely in the critical rigour with which Herbert Marcuse elucidates the reifying and repressive aspects of orthodox Marxist aesthetics, as well as the reductionist concept of consciousness which underlies them. Conversely, however, the failings of Marcuse's own subtle and incisive study result from certain inadequacies of his argument for the autonomy of art – the very concept with which he combats the reification of art. Ultimately, Marcuse restores the uncircumscribed complexity of the creative process, yet he does so in part by circumscribing the consummative experience of viewers whereby art achieves historical pertinence.

Specifically dismissing the deterministic idea that art merely reflects society, Marcuse observes that art 'opens a new dimension of experience'.<sup>2</sup> Although not stated, this concern with liberating human sensitivity through art is unquestionably connected to Marx's own insistence, in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, on the 'emancipation of the senses' and on the unfolding richness of the 'subjective human sensibility'. By relating this sensory liberation to the pleasure principle, however, Marcuse interprets art as much more than a process of aesthetic refinement leading to human wholeness. Rather, Marcuse sees art as an explosive force giving rise to another reason, another sensibility,

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1 This essay was published as a book review of Marcuse 1978.

2 Marcuse 1978, p. 7.



capable of subverting the dominant consciousness. Thus, art simultaneously enhances our perception of things and causes us to come into conflict with them. This process involves what Marcuse labels 'the hidden categorical imperative of art': art's realisation lies outside of itself, even though the conception of art goes beyond all else.<sup>3</sup> In contradistinction to orthodox Marxists, Marcuse contends that the political potential of art resides in the aesthetic form, supposedly autonomous, but not in any tendentious content that would restrict art to 'reality' while forcing the artist to 'record' it. For this reason, criticisms of Marcuse's aesthetic as being 'a literary concept of art' (by Telman Spengler and others, *Telos*, no. 38, 146) are obviously implausible because this is precisely the orthodox Marxist position Marcuse undermines. A parallel does exist between Marcuse's emphasis on art as a subversion of the established consciousness and Engels's ambivalence toward *Tendenz* art, which Marx disparaged as 'Schillerism'. In a letter to novelist Minna Kautsky (26 November 1885), Engels criticised art that imposes 'future historical solutions', because he found it less effective than art that destroys conventional illusions and instills doubt about the existing order. Nonetheless, Engels recommended this obliquity more as a political strategem than to underscore art's concrete immanence. Marcuse recognises the obliqueness of art's political dimension in order to allow an expansive ingress into the synthetic character of art, as well as to disallow the political hypostasis of aesthetics. Conversely, Engels's dichotomy of content (politics) and form (aesthetics) leads to such a hypostasis of art. In a sense, both Engels and Marcuse are indebted to Hegel's conception of art as a means to higher self-consciousness, yet neither accepts art as a reflection of the ontologic end toward which Hegel claimed it advances.

A connection to Hegel's conception of art as a means does not cut Marcuse off totally from Kant, whom Hegel said spoke the first rational word on aesthetics. In fact, Marcuse's position concerning the purported autonomy of art is often attenuated by its theoretical link to Kant's view of art as a self-subsistent end, a *pulchritudo vaga* (free beauty). Unlike Kant, Marcuse does not naively deem the aim of art to be 'disinterested contemplation' leading only to cognitive pleasure, as if art existed in a social vacuum free of antithetical forces. Nonetheless, by characterising the irreducible complexity of art's synthesis as art's 'autonomy' throughout *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse mistakes art's unending interdependence with a neo-Kantian idea of art's endless independence. As Adorno before him, Marcuse confuses art's semi-autonomy, its open-ended character, with the formalist view of art's autonomy, its supposed openness

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3 Marcuse 1978, p. 57.

only to itself. Unfortunately, the result is a translation of art's synthetic character into an antinomian 'nature', which simultaneously saves art from being reified by social concepts yet preserves society from art's seditious other reason. By the equivocation with which he uses the word 'autonomy', however, Marcuse indirectly concedes the tenuousness of a concept synonymous with certitude and self-containment: in some cases he refers to art as 'largely autonomous',<sup>4</sup> while in others he mentions art's complete autonomy, its 'essential transcendence'.<sup>5</sup>

Not surprisingly, the result is a critical approach which posits a relationship between art and history that is dichotomous at some times, dialectical at others. An example of Marcuse's flawed theoretical framework is his misuse of the term *avant-garde*, which he equates with modernism. *Avant-garde* art is characterised, as Renato Poggioli has shown, by a new *Weltanschauung* expressed aesthetically, yet modernism advances new art while presuming to abstain from any world views. Although *avant-garde* art concerns self-consciousness about life through art in the form of radical artistic styles, modernism limits self-consciousness to art media per se by reexamining qualities and conventions 'intrinsic' to them. The modernist aesthetic of a formalist critic like Clement Greenberg, who has correctly recognised his own affinity with Kant, assumes that art is hermetically self-involved and essentially asocial. Not only does Marcuse fail to appreciate the political dimension of *avant-garde* art by confusing it with modernist formalism, he also reveals an inconsistency of his critique when he states that *avant-garde* art is revolutionary in form, but not in politics. On the one hand, Marcuse argues that 'in the work of art, form becomes content and vice versa'<sup>6</sup> and that 'art can attain political relevance only as autonomous work'.<sup>7</sup> On the other, he refers to *avant-garde* art as merely 'a radical change in style and technique' which does not express the prevailing unfreedom and the horizon of change.<sup>8</sup> This assessment is a tacit return to the archaic bifurcation of art by orthodox Marxists, which Marcuse otherwise refutes so deftly. Ironically, this condemnation of neo-Kantian formalism is done by means of a dichotomy involving aesthetics and politics close to Kant's sterile antinomies of art and life. Thus, Habermas's criticism of Marcuse's position in *The Aesthetic Dimension* for not taking into account modern art's thematisation of itself (*Telos*, no. 38, 143) is plausible *only* concerning the passages that contradict

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4 Marcuse 1978, p. ix.

5 Marcuse 1978, p. 37.

6 Marcuse 1978, p. 41.

7 Marcuse 1978, p. 53.

8 Marcuse 1978, p. xi.

Marcuse's major thesis about the inextricably intertwined relationship of aesthetics and politics – a thesis which is a critical extension of avant-garde theory.

Even when directed against modernist formalism rather than the avant-garde, Marcuse's charge of formal radicality without political radicalism is a concession to the erroneous claims of 'asocial' artists. Significantly, the myth of art's autonomy and transcendence was originally used as an effective political act connoting a refusal to comply with bourgeois society. First championed by artists such as Gautier in the nineteenth century, and derived from Kant's notion of art as a purposefulness without purpose, *l'art pour l'art* began as a cry of the disenfranchised, the alienated, and the socially repressed. It is unquestionably this early use of the idea of autonomy Marcuse describes when he writes that a real counterculture must insist on the autonomy of art 'on its own autonomous art'.<sup>9</sup> Since the late 1950s, however, with the rise of Minimalism, Post-Painterly Abstraction, and Postminimalism, the myth of autonomy has become an effective means of reconciling radically new art forms with the capitalist system. By declaring themselves above politics in their art, modernist artists have become increasingly patronised by corporate interests (from \$22 million in 1965 to \$250 million in 1978) precisely because of their presumed 'apoliticism'. No longer a refusal to comply, so-called autonomous art has been deftly appropriated by the established system, so that claims of autonomy are now an effective way of being compliant without ever disavowing the avant-garde detachment which formerly kept this art from being acceptable to the status quo. At present, the purported uselessness of art – its distance from what Baudelaire termed the vulgar utilitarianism of bourgeois society that tried, as Marx noted, to reduce even art to the dominant mode of productivity – has made this art useful to this same system because of the way art is used to sanctify the institutions which promote it. Quietly ignoring Oscar Wilde's contention that all art is quite useless, David Rockefeller recently observed that art's exalted and transcendental stature provides companies that buy it with extensive publicity, a brighter reputation, 'an improved corporate image'. Formerly, the expansion of art's semi-autonomy into the myth of art's complete autonomy was an acknowledged act of distancing art from the established order. Now, the myth of autonomy has been inverted, so that it is an unacknowledged act of complicity with the established order, even while art is eulogised for its 'purity', its distance from all else. As such, art's semi-autonomy is lost, as art is reified into an extension of one-dimensional society. Significantly, art's freedom from compliance with corporate capitalism has been maintained by

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9 Marcuse 1978, p. 52.

artists who recognise art's semi-autonomy and who combat the formalist myth of its complete autonomy. By conveying this position through their art, feminists like Nancy Spero and meta-conceptualists like Hans Haacke have disallowed the reification of art in the name of 'pure' politics, the demand of orthodox Marxists, and in the name of 'pure' aesthetics, the contention of western formalists.

Marcuse's position concerning these developments lacks the incisiveness of much of his book. While he derides the 'illusory autonomy' of much abstract art,<sup>10</sup> Marcuse also argues that the 'categorical imperative of autonomy' is 'things must change'. However true this was for much avant-garde art, it is now much too divorced from concrete situations to be of real value. One reason for Marcuse's insidious optimism about the political effectiveness of 'autonomous' art, aside from its neo-Kantian aspect, is his restatement of Walter Benjamin's earlier position concerning the explosiveness of this art, such as that of the Dadaists or Surrealists. Unfortunately, this once radical art has now been domesticated and neutralised. Similarly, Nietzsche's view of art as a will to power capable of molding society is also taken over by Marcuse, in spite of the fact that the historical situation has dramatically defused the potency of counterculture art. Now, 'radical' art, far from being a liberating shaper of culture, is itself reshaped – regardless of artistic intent – to be easily assimilated by the established system. Only Haacke, Spero, and a few others remain scandalously aloof and unappropriated, hence potential instigators of 'another reason, another sensibility'. Just as Marcuse's notion of autonomy often attenuates the synthetic interplay of art's varied aspects, so this same notion of art's completeness also underestimates the dialectical interchange between art and its perceivers. Oscar Wilde's acute characterisation of 'the critic as artist' is implausibly downplayed by Marcuse's notion of autonomous art as *categorically* revolutionary, as if all art were not continually reinterpreted by viewers who experience it, by critical theory which extends it, and by people who realise it. In short, there is no permanently revolutionary art; there is only potentially committed art, some of it inadvertent, which is forever capable of being consummated by critical theory and political praxis. The art work is only the inception of a complex dialectic, not its conclusion, always needing viewer interchange. Art is significant only insofar as it initiates various dialogues, some of them political, which keep it open-ended and historically pertinent. Adorno's criticism of Surrealism for trying to fuse object and subject within art, rather than recognising that art is a mediation between the two, can be applied to Marcuse's

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10 Marcuse 1978, p. 40.

attempted restriction of artistic statements and critical interpretations to the art itself, as something both intrinsically and extrinsically revolutionary. Any theory of art as complete in itself, or autonomous, tends to restrict perceiver experience to a simple stimulus-response Situation 'objectively' determined. The concrete experience of committed art, however, shows the situation to be far more complex and hardly predetermined.

Although Marcuse's discussion of the relationship between art and its audience tends to eliminate one in favor of the other, his discussion of how negativity and affirmation interpenetrate each other in art is incisive. As he observes, 'compared with the often one-dimensional optimism of propaganda, art is permeated with pessimism, not seldom intertwined with comedy'.<sup>11</sup> One reason for this aesthetic duality is the position of beauty which, as Marcuse notes, is the visual experience of Eros and the pleasure principle, hence also a rebellion against the reality principle that thwarts it. For Marcuse, the beautiful in art is its opposition to the established order. This conception of beauty effectively distinguishes Marcuse's position from Kant's, which maintained that the cognitive perception of beauty was attainable through disinterested contemplation. Kant's position presupposed: 1) an implausible disjunction between cognition and emotion, between art and the ambiances in which it is created and contemplated; and 2) the neoclassical idea of beauty as a harmonious union of opposites, a cohesion without tension. It was, of course, this particular idea of beauty which Valéry had in mind when he wrote that beauty is now a corpse. Thus, the Kantian definition of beauty remains untenable, because in contradistinction to Marcuse's it does not take into account the antithetical forces constituting art that simultaneously pull art toward reality, yet also propel it beyond the given order or dominant reality principle. By merely inverting Kantian formalism, unlike Marcuse, orthodox Marxists such as Roger Garaudy have promoted an art that simply affirms a 'perfect' order, either purportedly present under Stalin, or naively presumed for the future. Unfortunately, the orthodox Marxists have lost their footing while turning Kant on his head, thus creating another antinomy involving art, not a dialectical approach to art. In crudely reducing art to 'realistic' politics, conventional Marxists have merely substituted harmonious views of life for Kant's unacceptably harmonious conception of art. The potency of art as an obstreperous creative act grounded in life, yet not reducible to it, is missed by both positions, which entail either a view of art as self-subsistent or a notion of history as self-contained.

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11 Marcuse 1978, p. 14.

An interesting achievement of Marcuse's *The Aesthetic Dimension*, at odds with his earlier writings, is a synthesis of beauty and negation which leads to an important qualification of avant-garde attacks on Aristotelian catharsis. Earlier, Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin had advocated the 'estrangement effect' in art to combat the socially conciliatory effect of catharsis. For Brecht the cathartic effect was something to be avoided, as he felt it was a major reason art had become a social narcotic, what Benjamin aptly termed 'a school for asocial behavior'. Both men endorsed avant-garde art, such as Brecht's plays, because in this way art became 'an instrument of bellestics', which shocked, provoked, and confronted spectators, thus making art useless for contemplative immersion. In his writings from the 1930s through the 1960s, Marcuse furthered this call for negativity, because 'by exhibiting the beautiful as present, art pacifies rebellious desires' ('The Affirmative Character of Culture', in *Negations*, 121). In the 1960s, Marcuse was a major spokesman for the left, with his belief that established beauty must be revoked by means of a new 'aesthetic ethos' giving art 'a desublimated, sensuous form of frightening immediacy' (in *An Essay on Liberation*, 47).

In spite of the political import of Brecht's plays in the 1930s and of *arte povera*, as well as Conceptual Art and the other movements influenced by Marcuse in the 1960s, much of this art is plagued at present by its 'pure', perhaps undialectical, negativity. Precisely because this negation was so extreme, it is now viewed as proof of the anarchistic separateness of art and the bohemian artist, an indicator of the irreconcilability of society and aesthetics. In turn, art became safely distant from life. This acceptance of the avant-garde has also occurred because some of the art resulted, as Donald Kuspit has shown, from *ressentiment* – the love of oppositionism and the delight in alienation not really desiring that its demands be realised. Significantly, Marcuse recognises the failure of most anti-art, and in *The Aesthetic Dimension* he argues that a renunciation of aesthetic form is an abdication of responsibility.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, he notes that anti-art has often become an unorthodox type of conformity. Going beyond his earlier emphasis on revoking beauty, Marcuse now concludes that aesthetic form, even in Brecht's plays, is not only that by which art stands against society, but also that by which art is 'a form of affirmation through the reconciling catharsis'.<sup>13</sup> This reintroduction, or rather reacknowledgment, of the cathartic dimension is not done merely to make his approach more dialectical – that would border on *apriorism* – but in response to con-

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<sup>12</sup> Marcuse 1978, p. 52.

<sup>13</sup> Marcuse 1978, p. 58.

crete historical developments. Furthermore, this use of catharsis is connected to Marcuse's idea of beauty as a recalcitrant affirmation of sensuous forms and other reasons in the face of a repressive social order.

One of the most significant aspects of Marcuse's important book is his refusal to ignore art's concrete, sensuous, and semi-autonomous character, that which causes us to perceive art qua art, as well as art as critical theory, social commentary, and the expression of Eros. By refusing to codify the irreducible complexity of art, Marcuse gives the dialectical approach to art a strong self-critical turn, making it both less 'conclusive' and more enlightening than the stultifying certitude of orthodox Marxists. As such, Marcuse has written a study of aesthetics that will be central to intelligent discussions of this subject for some time. It is one of those profound books that simply must be taken into account.

## Corporate Capitalism and South Africa

Nothing so testifies that the U.S. Position on South Africa is long, as the inability of the U.S. government to admit what its position really is. For almost 20 years, the U.S. has officially condemned the South African institution of apartheid, yet in that very time period U.S. corporate investment has experienced an economical increase. Similarly, in spite of U.S. laws disallowing military shipments to the South African government, the armed forces of South Africa – now the largest in the continent – have nevertheless been extensively supplied with United States weaponry. The paradoxical and hardly neutral position of the United States government with regard to the present South African regime is itself linked to larger developments which will be the focal point of this article.

In particular, I hope to show how the dynamics of capitalism and the institution of apartheid have been and continue to be inexplicably linked in South Africa. In so doing, I will refute the position taken by the *verligtes* – or white ‘reformers’ in South Africa – as well as by corporate apologists in the United States, namely, their argument that capitalism and apartheid have somehow been incidental to each other, that the political solution to apartheid is simply the further development of corporate capitalism in South Africa. This view has been succinctly presented in the *Financial Mail*, South Africa’s leading business weekly: ‘Every extra rand interested is thus another ray of hope for those trapped on the dark side of apartheid, every extra job created is another step toward the peaceful transition that the inexorable process of economic life will impose’ (11 September 1970).<sup>1</sup>

In dealing with the present situation in South Africa, I will address several issues: *First* – what apartheid specifically entails, along with an examination of how it is interdependent with multinational corporate expansion: *second* – the way in which racial laws have been consistently installed to meet *economic* needs of the white minority in South Africa: *third* – the internal contradictions of the present system that show it to be as structurally doomed as the institution of apartheid is ethically abhorrent.<sup>2</sup>

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1 An excellent refutation of the *Financial Mail* editorial can be found in Litvak, De Grasse and McTigue 1978, pp. 11–12.

2 For the internal contradictions, see especially Gelb and Saul 1981.



Apartheid as it now exists was instituted in 1948 when the Afrikaans-speaking whites (Afrikaners are South African whites of Dutch ancestry) won control of the South African parliament from the English-speaking whites. The victorious Nationalist Party, which has been in power ever since, codified the already existing racism into a specific social system. The ideology for this system is known as 'apartheid' – which in Afrikaans means 'apartness' – and it supposedly involves the total segregation of races, with a special programme for the separate development of each. Under this system, the native black African population has been denied local residency in all urban centres and in all 'white' rural areas, in spite of the fact that by 1948 over 25 percent of the black population was located in urban areas. Since then blacks have been forced to live only in designated African homelands – the so-called *Bantustans*. Although the blacks constitute around 75 percent of the national population, the Bantustans consist of only 13 percent of the land in South Africa – land which also happens to be the less fertile in the country. Thus, the other 87 percent of the land, which is both richer and far more developed, belongs to the whites, who make up around 16 percent of the South African population. In addition, the remaining 9 percent of the populace, that of the Asians and the Coloureds, is located in urban ghettos within the white reserves. *An immediate legal consequence of this land division is that three-fourths of the people in South Africa are relegated to the status of migratory citizens within almost 90 percent of their own country.*<sup>3</sup>

Although the institution of apartheid has separated *where* blacks and whites live, it has not totally segregated the races in accordance with the ideology of apartheid. Even in 1948, Dr. Hendrik Verwoerd, the major theoretician of apartheid, admitted that the ideal of total separation was simply not within the realm of possibility. The reason for this acknowledged inconsistency was simple. To have completely isolated whites from blacks would have undermined the white-controlled economic system, by eliminating the labour force upon which it was based. The human consequences of this contradictory system resulting from apartheid have been equally simple. Black Africans have been segregated from political power, social interchange, and educational rights even as they have been integrated economically within the system responsible for these deprivations. This process was aptly summed up in 1968 by then South African Prime Minister John Vorster: 'It is true that there are blacks working for us ... in spite of the ideal we have to separate them com-

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3 See Litvak, De Grasse and McTigue 1978, pp. 16–25.

pletely ... we need them, because they work for us but the fact that they work for us can never entitle them to claim political rights. Not now, nor in the future'.<sup>4</sup>

In light of this official position, it should come as no surprise to learn that the five basic policies of apartheid have defined black Africans *solely as economic entities*. The *Influx Control* laws insure that only those blacks essential to the economy will be present in urban areas. These workers must leave their families behind in the Bantustans while working and they must leave the urban areas whenever their work has been finished. The *Bantu Urban Areas Act of 1945* and the *Bantu Laws Amendment Act of 1964* make it illegal for a black African to be in an urban area without a job and they call for periodic contract checks to determine that the workers have been hired by whites. The *Laws Regulating Labour Recruitment & Restricting Unionisation* serve as effective means of controlling black workers *within* urban areas. A national system of labour bureaus process the hiring, firing, and inspection of black workers. The *Bantu Labour Act of 1953*, the *Individual Conciliation Act of 1956* and the *Bantu Regulation Act of 1969* further consolidate the control of the white minority within the workplace by making the strikes of black workers illegal, by making black unions illegal, and by excluding the black labour force from a meaningful collective bargaining. One of the most revealing aspects of the apartheid system is the *Colour Bar* legislation. These laws exclude black workers from taking certain jobs, especially artisanal and vocational positions. According to the *Individual Conciliation Act of 1956*, various upper level jobs are reserved for whites with the Minister of Labour being empowered to fix certain racial percentages for any workplace. To enable the South African police to keep watch constantly over the movements of Black people, there are *Pass Laws* which require all Blacks over 16 to carry so-called Reference Books for identification purposes. These books must be signed each month by a white employer, as specified by the *Bantu Act of 1952*, otherwise the worker is subject to prosecution and deportation. Every day over 1,000 black workers are arrested for Reference Book irregularities. In 1975 alone 400,000 black workers were prosecuted for such offences. The fifth major aspect of apartheid policy includes the aforementioned Bantustans. All black Africans are assigned to a Bantustan homeland, which is their legal site of residence. They live in white areas only at the pleasure of their employers. Furthermore, even the so-called 'free' homelands have been legally depoliticised by the *Bantu Homelands Constitution Act, No. 21, of 1971*, which prohibits local Bantustan legislation from dealing with matters of defence, banking, mass transit, the mass media,

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4 Cited in Schimdt 1980, p. 2.

and anything else in any way connected to political power. As if this were not enough, the Bantustan homelands themselves are patrolled by South African policemen.<sup>5</sup>

With this system to defend, it is clear why the coercive apparatus needs to be so extensive and why the South African army is so well armed. There are at least 59 different laws concerning the protection of 'national security'. One law in particular is very often evoked. This is the *Terrorism Act*, No. 83, of 1967, which defines terrorism as the public advocacy of withdrawing foreign investments, thus endangering law and order in South Africa (at least we know now where President Reagan got his definition of 'terrorism'). The minimum punishment for conviction is five years, the maximum penalty is death. In 1975, for example, nine members of the South African Student Organisation – an organisation founded by Steve Biko – were convicted of 'terrorism' because they openly condemned foreign investment in their country's economy. All nine of these students received prison sentences of from five to ten years. Nothing more graphically illustrates the inhumanity of this system than the fact that, by South African law, everyone reading this article is permitting, if not engaging in, *terrorist* activities. Were we in South Africa right now, we would all be subject to immediate arrest and banning, if not imprisonment or execution. A U.S. Congressional Hearing in January of 1978 featured testimony by Donald Woods, the former editor of the *Daily Dispatch* (published in East London, South Africa), in which he related how he was banned and exiled from South Africa for openly discussing things less 'inflammatory' than are included in this paper.<sup>6</sup>

Aside from the obvious barbarism of this system, however, we need to look at the underlying import of these five basic aspects of the apartheid system. Far from being just random acts of irrational racism, the Influx Controls, the Labour Bureaus, the Colour Bar, the Pass Laws, and the Bantustans all add up to a very cohesive strategy for insuring the controlled maintenance of a cheap labour supply. Because this cheap labour supply is ruthlessly stripped of any self-determination or political rights, it is solely at the mercy of the iron laws of supply and demand – or to be more precise the demands of the capital sector in South Africa and in the United States. By relegating almost all blacks to nonprofessional jobs in the industrial sector while elevating every

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5 See United Nations Unit on Apartheid, *Industrialization, Foreign Capital and Forced Labor in South Africa* (U.N., New York, 1970), pp. 30–3 and Rogers 1978. Also, Litvak, De Grasse and McTigue 1978, pp. 22–5.

6 U.S. Congressional Hearings: U.S. Policy Towards South Africa, 95th Congress, 2nd Session. Washington, D.C., Jan. 31. 1978.

white worker to at least an artisanal profession, if not a managerial position, South Africa has identified race with class and class with race to a striking degree. This conflation of race, in particular for the Black Africans, with class to this extent is in fact unusual even for colonial African societies of the past. As Giovanni Arrighi has noted of Zimbabwe and other tropical African nations, much of their population consists of pre-capitalist agrarian producers who do not depend for their subsistence on wage labour.<sup>7</sup>

In these agricultural pockets of traditional pre-capitalist economies, the specialisation of labour has not gone far, a wide range of commodities is still not produced, and market exchange has yet to become the all-important determinate. While Arrighi's comments still apply to post-revolutionary Zimbabwe, which has a large peasantry, his characterisation of tropical Africa does not apply to South Africa.

Because of its extensive industrialisation, the capitalist economy of South Africa has long since eliminated pre-capitalist agrarian classes, with the black African population being almost entirely a wage-labour working class. In fact, the various stages of South African history feature a classic case of the progressive reduction of landed peasants to landless wage earners. As late as 1910, South Africa still had a large agricultural sector of native Africans committed to subsistence farming and with the land to do it – so much so, in fact, that when the diamond and gold mines of South Africa were first opened they were worked by imported wage earners. The mine owners were unsuccessful in recruiting native blacks for the work, so between 1890–1910 they had to bring in labourers from as far away as China. Only after the *Native Land Act of* 1913 which led to the forcible expulsion of the black Africans from their land and the restriction of this race as a whole to a circumscribed area disallowing any further agrarian subsistence, was there a dramatic conversion of a pre-capitalist class into the present working class.<sup>8</sup>

A current tactic used to deal with both the high rate of black employment and the increasing shortage of skilled white labour is very indicative of how specialised the wage earners in the South African economy have become. Known as 'job fragmentation', this manoeuvre involves giving a position formerly held by one white artisan to at least two semi-skilled black labourers. Yet this labour tactic, however racist its use, is hardly an invention of apartheid. In fact, job fragmentation is little more than the division of labour within the workplace which is *intrinsic* to the capitalist mode of production. First

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7 Arrighi and Saul 1977, pp. 13–14.

8 Legassick 1974a, Johnstone 1973, Wolpe 1972, Legassick 1974b, Magubane 1979.

observed by Adam Smith in his famous discussion of how pin-making had been divided up into 18 different steps, this intentional cheapening of labour in order to strip it of political power (Ch. 1 of *The Wealth of Nations*) was advocated by F.W. Taylor in a more refined form before a Special Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives in the early part of this century.<sup>9</sup> The primary thing which distinguishes the 'job fragmentation' of apartheid from the labour division peculiar to capitalism is the way the white minority uses it as a weapon against black workers whereas in most advanced capitalist societies this fragmentation is ruthlessly applied to workers of all other races as well.

Given the brutal inconsistency with which apartheid has been instituted, it is not surprising to learn that the impressive fruits of this corporate capitalist system have been very unequally distributed. From 1948 until 1975, the economy of South Africa experienced a growth almost as extreme as the system of repression upon which it is based. Since 1945, its Gross National Product has increased 2,000 percent. From 1950–75 its GNP went from \$3.7 billion to \$13.9 billion dollars. During this period, the growth rate of its economy as a whole was six percent – a remarkably high rate surpassed during this same period only by the economies of Japan and West Germany.<sup>10</sup> In spite of this impressive record for the national economy, however, this expansion has been accompanied by a relative decline in the standards of the very people who made it possible, the black Africans. As of 1979, the blacks who represent 75 percent of the population were paid only 23 percent of the national income. The whites, who compose only 16 percent of the population, were paid 67 percent of the national income, with the Asians and the coloureds receiving the remaining 10 percent. In 1966 whites earned on the average 16 times more than blacks, yet in 1975 this rose to 17 times that of blacks. In 1970 the average white household earned 362 Rand per month more than the average black household. While the official poverty in South Africa during 1975 was \$127.00 per month for an average family, 63.5 percent of all black families earned less than \$92.00 per month. Thus, at a time when the South African economy was at an extraordinary peak (and it is currently entering a crisis), something like two-thirds of the black population was living not merely in poverty, but in abject poverty, with the rest of this black population hardly existing much above it. Perhaps the most graphic indicators of the desperate situation in which blacks now find themselves can be gauged by the fact that South Africa has the highest prison population per

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9 See Taylor's Testimony before the Special House Committee in Taylor 1947, pp. 79–85. Also, see Braverman 1974, pp. 59–139.

10 Harsch 1977, p. 391. Also, see Duggan 1973.

capita in the world, that according to a 1966 survey 50 percent of all black children born in the reserves do not reach the age of five, that the distribution of doctors is around 1:400 for whites and 1:44,000 for blacks.<sup>11</sup>

For many reasons however, it would be naive to assume that somehow things would be OK if the white minority had merely chosen to pay higher salaries and to encourage investors to extract less of the wealth. When the white minority chose the road of corporate capitalism, it had to compete with more advanced economic systems in the West – economic systems which could produce cheaply because of *the scale* on which they operated and because of the level of technology they possessed. In this way, the white minority government was able to entice large capital investments by foreign corporations, but in order to continue its national growth the South African government needed to insure a very high rate of return on investment – a rate of return which was possible only if salaries were kept brutally low while the amount of surplus value was kept seductively high. *Growth was based on foreign capital; the investment of foreign capital pre-supposed cheap labour; the maintenance of cheap labour involved racial exploitation.* Hence, a spokesman for the South African Reserve Bank could confess in 1972: 'In the long run, South Africa has to a large extent been dependent on foreign capital for developmental purposes'.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Mr. Froneman, the Deputy Minister for Justice could admit: 'We need *black* labour for the sake of the *white* economy. Without them it would be impossible to maintain the essential growth rate'.<sup>13</sup>

On both accounts the white minority was successful. It institutionalised pre-existing racism into a network of economic and social relationships which insured cheap black labour. Thus, it grew to a marked degree because apartheid provided the level of returns necessary to secure foreign investments, without which the system of South Africa could not have grown as it has. *In short, the success of corporate capitalism in South Africa was directly dependent on the success of the apartheid policies.* The progression of this economic system necessarily led to the perpetuation of racism in an institutionalised form. For this reason, we must beware of reducing the South African system either to something externally imposed by monopoly capital or to something internally generated by a national history of racism. The present system resulted from a

11 South African Institute of Race Relations, *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa*: 1974 (Johannesburg, 1975). p. 257, Friedman 1978, pp. 19–21. Also, see Schmidt 1980, p. 6.

12 Legassick 1974b, 'South Africa: Forced Labour,' p. 242. Also, Litvak, De Grasse and McTique 1978, p. 40.

13 Rogers 1978, p. 10. Also, Litvak, De Grasse and McTique 1978, p. 23.

dynamic interchange between the two, so that the elimination of one will profoundly alter the other. Nothing testifies more directly to the interdependence between the present South African economy and monopoly capitalism, than the degree of U.S. corporate involvement. From 1943 to 1978, U.S. investments in South Africa went from \$50 million to \$2 billion – an increase of 4,000 percent in the same period when the GNP of South Africa was so miraculously experiencing a 2,000 percent increase.<sup>14</sup>

This greater involvement during and after the institution of apartheid occurred at a time of decreasing acceptance of South Africa by the world community of nations. During the period from 1945 until the present, the system of apartheid has been condemned by the U.N. General Assembly, by the International Labour Organisation, by the World Council of Churches, and by almost every country on earth, including the U.S. To understand why this U.S. corporate involvement has grown massively in a period of such diminishing acceptance of South Africa, we need primarily to look at one statistic, namely, *the amount of profit made possible by this involvement*. From 1960–70, U.S. investments in South Africa enjoyed an average rate of return of 18.6 percent as opposed to an average rate of return of only 11 percent elsewhere in the world.<sup>15</sup> In other words, an investment made in South Africa was over 50 percent more remunerative than an investment elsewhere in the world. Not surprisingly, the logic of capitalism – which reduces everything to marketplace considerations – resulted in expanding multinational corporate investments. It would be simplistic to think that U.S. corporations have become involved merely because they are run by individual racists. Rather we must recognise that the system of corporate capitalism has functioned and will continue to function in such a way as to make situations like South Africa unavoidable.

The multinational character of the South African economy is clear when we examine not only the voluminous U.S. involvement, but also the proportion of foreign investment as a whole in South Africa. In the critical years from 1946–50, when the present economic system was gaining momentum, 40 percent of all domestic investment in South Africa was foreign. From 1956 until 1976, the foreign investment went from 2.8 Billion Rand to 20 Billion Rand. By 1970, 40 percent of South African manufacturing was controlled by foreign investments, while in the same year 80 percent of South American private industrial production was under foreign control.<sup>16</sup>

14 South African Institute of Race Relations, *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa*: 1978 (Johannesburg, 1979), p. 141. Also, Schmidt 1980, p. 4.

15 Harsch 1977, p. 434. Also, Litvak, De Grasse and McTigue 1978, p. 25.

16 John Burns, 'Full Sanctions Awkward: South Africa is Big Business', *The New York Times*,

But how do these investments translate into concrete acts of support for apartheid? The answers are savagely simple, if we look at U.S. corporate involvement. Like any police state, the South African government needs motor vehicles. Well, 33 percent of the South African market for these vehicles is controlled by three corporations: General Motors, Ford, Chrysler. Furthermore, the first domestically designed South African car was developed by a subsidiary of General Motors. As the National Council of Churches has observed in protest, vehicles made by these American corporations are routinely used by the South African police. In spite of 1978 U.S. Commerce Department regulations prohibiting the sale of any American-made commodity to the South African military or police, Ford and General Motors have consistently by-passed these regulations by selling South African-made vehicles which contain no American-made parts.<sup>17</sup> (Incidentally, it would not be surprising if, in the future, Reagan eliminates these regulations as an impediment to the 'Free enterprise' system.) Since police cars require oil, the next question is where does it come from and who supplies it? Not surprisingly, the answer is that all but eight percent of the oil needed by South Africa is imported by six multinational firms, three of which are based in the United States: Exxon, Mobil, and Caltex (a subsidiary of Texaco & Standard Oil). Together, these three corporations control 44 percent of the petroleum market. In a country which is 92 percent dependent on imported oil the vulnerability of the white South African government to oil sanctions is clear.<sup>18</sup>

Because police cars cannot run without tires, Goodyear and Firestone supply a major portion of those needed. Since diesel locomotives are necessary to transport weapons, as well as ordinary products, General Electric provides them – in fact 80 percent of those used in South Africa. Before you can make rubber tires, you need a binding agent called carbon black, therefore Philips Petroleum controls 50 percent of the market through a South African subsidiary.<sup>19</sup>

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6 November 1977; U.N. Commission on Transnational Corporations, 'Activities of Transnational Corporations in Southern Africa and the Extent of Their Collaboration With the Illegal Regimes in the Area', New York, 6 April 1977.

17 *Financial Mail*, 15 June 1977. Litvak, De Grasse and McTigue 1978, pp. 47–9.

18 Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, *The Expansion of Foreign Oil Companies in South Africa*, March 1976, p. 6; Investor Responsibility Research Center, U.S. Business and South Africa: *The Withdrawal Issue*, Special Report 1977–D, November 1977, pp. 5, 38–44.

19 Investor Responsibility Research Center, p. 40. Also, Litvak, De Grasse and McTigue 1978, p. 56.



Police without guns are like a military without airplanes, thus the U.S. business sector – in spite of a 1963 U.N. embargo on arms shipments to South Africa – has helped to rectify this situation. Between 1972–5 the Olin Arms corporation violated both U.S. law and U.N. sanctions by shipping 3,200 firearms and over 20 million rounds of ammunition to South Africa. When Olin was convicted of 21 criminal charges in 1978, the U.S. court penalised it a mere \$510,000, although the arms deal itself resulted in a \$300,000,000 dollar profit. Furthermore, in an article in *The Nation* (July 15, 1978) Michael T. Klare demonstrated that this transaction was merely the tip of U.S. corporate involvement in the illicit arms trade with South Africa. His observation is clearly strengthened by an article which appeared in the 1978 edition of *The Military Balance*, an annual survey of world military forces published in London by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. According to this publication, 40 percent of front-line aircraft – 161 out of 362 planes and helicopters – in the South African Air Force are partly or fully of U.S. origin.

It would, of course, be impossible for four million whites to police 20 million blacks (as well as 2.5 million Asians and coloureds), if they did not have extremely effective technology for storing and recalling information. Thanks to multinational corporations, the white minority has it. Computers are absolutely essential to the South African police state. Seventy percent of the market for South African computers is controlled by U.S. investments, *with I.B.M. alone controlling between 40–50 percent of the entire market*. As C. Cotton, a managing director of the South African Burroughs corporation, stated in 1971: 'We're entirely dependent on the U.S. The economy would grind to a halt without access to the computer technology of the west'.<sup>20</sup> Behind most powerful militaries, there are powerful banks. The police state of South Africa is no exception. Of the outstanding loan claims in South Africa, around 33 percent – approximately \$2 billion of a \$6 billion debt – is owed to U.S. banks. Citibank, the largest bank in the world, has the most substantial loan out to South Africa – around \$200 million. Also involved are Morgan Guaranty, Chase Manhattan, Bank of America, and several others. Furthermore, the largest portions of these loans were made in 1960 and in 1976 – the two years in which strong black opposition to white rule caused other foreign investors to withdraw their loans.<sup>21</sup>

The *nature* of this U.S. corporate investment consummates the business cycle and very logically illuminates the degree of its involvement with the South

20 Rogers 1978, p. 133. Also, Litvak, De Grasse and McTigue 1978, p. 50.

21 Reed Kramer, 'In Hock to U.S. Banks', *The Nation*, 11 December 1976. Also, see Litvak, De Grasse and McTigue 1978, pp. 57–61.

African government. *The same system of repression which created cheap labour – thus insuring corporate capitalism's growth – also engendered opposition to this repression – thus providing corporations with markets to supply tools for this repression.* Hence, the police state responsible for maintaining apartheid has become a major consumer of commodities to extend the repression. The conditions of cheap labour necessitate the production of devices that continually enforce these conditions of cheap labour. Obviously, it would be absurd to argue, as many business executives do, that further investments and more productivity will somehow alleviate the circumstances of apartheid. The historical progression and internal dynamics of monopoly capitalism cannot lead to Black independence. Furthermore the extent to which corporate capitalism has needed and continues to need a police state is clear. Few are foolish enough to argue openly that strengthening a police state will somehow cause it to end, yet this position is unquestionably implicit in any argument for the benevolent expansion of corporate capitalism in South Africa.

As recent developments show, however, the cycle of corporate capitalist expansion is developing increasingly large fissures because of its internal contradictions. Since the late 1970s, the South African economy has been in real trouble. In 1981, for example, there was a 20 percent fall in national living standards, a 30 percent rise in food prices, an unemployment figure among black Africans of around 25 percent. This slowdown in the economy has occurred because of structural problems which are becoming ever more unresolvable. One problem is a diminishing market for consumer goods.<sup>22</sup> After 1948 there was a rapid rise in the living standards of all whites, along with a relative decline in the living standards of blacks. This development led to a greater demand for consumer goods, but given the numerical minority of whites the consumer market has *now* become saturated, with the next step being either economic stagnation or the granting of increased economic power to blacks – an economic power, however, which will further strengthen and justify their already insistent demands for political power. As a spokesman for the banned, but still very important, African National Congress stated: 'It is not enough to grant higher wages here, better conditions there, for this leaves the apartheid System intact – in fact it props up for longer – the very source of our misery and degradation'.<sup>23</sup> Another black leader was quoted in the *Washington Post* as say-

22 Gelb and Saul 1981, pp. 25–7.

23 Morton 1973, p. 40. See also: 'Black Opposition to U.S. Investment in S. Africa', *The Washington Post*, 14 January 1977, p. 12 and Senator Dick Clark, Africa: Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate (Washington, D.C., U.S. Govt. Printing Office, July 1977), p. 34.

ing that today black students hate the word 'middle class', because 'They say it makes people forget'.<sup>24</sup>

Another structural contradiction intrinsic to the present economic situation in South Africa involves the serious shortage of skilled labour. The colour bar has frozen the social division of labour into a racial hierarchy but the increased growth of business has created severe labour shortages for white-reserved jobs. The managerial crisis illustrates this problem well. At present less than one percent of all labour managers are black, yet if the present economic growth is sustained at its present rate to 1987, whites will be able to fill only 40 percent of these managerial positions.<sup>25</sup> The dilemma for the white minority then is critical. If it lifts the colour bar in order to save the economy, it will lose much of its control of a growing industry. With this loss will come a greater degree of economic self-determination for blacks, who will unquestionably be able to translate this gain into greater political freedom. An increase in professional and managerial positions for blacks will allow them to operate industry without white expertise. On the other hand, however, if the white minority maintains the colour bar in an effort to retain full control of what can only be a diminishing industry, it will be faced with bankruptcy, if not insurrection.

A third major problem involves the explosive issue of unemployment among blacks. Because of its ever-increasing commitment to higher rates of return, the white minority has relied on capital-intensive industry, rather than on labour-intensive industry. Although this has so far guaranteed high returns and tight control of production, it has also caused massive black unemployment, which now stands at 25 percent of its labour force. When in 1970, black employment was only 12 percent, then Prime Minister Vorster said: 'The biggest danger in South Africa today is not terrorism, but unemployment'.<sup>26</sup> This paradox of advanced monopoly capitalism, whereby economic growth is coupled with a decreasing need for labour, remains conspicuously unanswered at a time when 40,000 black workers are entering the job market every year. A recent estimate shows that 1,000 new jobs every day for the next 20 years alone would solve the problem of unemployment.

Needless to say, the economic crisis in South Africa is generating very heated debates. All sides among the Afrikaners agree with the editor of the *Financial Mail*, who stated only recently: 'The greatest fear I find (among white South

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24 Caryl Murphy, 'South Africa Offers Lures to the Blacks', *The Washington Post*, 13 March 1980. Also, Schmidt 1980, p. 84.

25 Gelb and Saul 1981, p. 30.

26 Gelb and Saul 1981, p. 17.

Africans) is that so little has been done to foster an appreciation of private enterprise among blacks'.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the two major Afrikaner responses to this dilemma are strongly divergent. The *verkrampptes* (or conservatives), such as Hendrik van den Burgh, argue that now no reforms are possible without inevitably opening the door to black political power. Their opponents, the *verligtes* (or reformers), led by Prime Minister Botha and corporate executive Harry Oppenheimer, argue that reforms alone can save the present South African economy. Their position was perhaps best stated, when former Minister of Justice Jimmy Kruger remarked that South Africa must create a black middle class to counter the threat of black power. Nevertheless, the shallowness and the implausibility of this plan for reform was noted even by U.S. Ambassador William Bowdler, who in March 1977 sent a confidential cable to the U.S. State Department, in which he observed: 'Even if foreign firms offer minor reforms, it is only to create a comfortable black middle class which will perpetuate exploitation of the masses'.<sup>28</sup>

It is very clear that the struggle between the *verkrampptes* and the *verligtes* cannot lead to a winner, because the major historical force in South Africa now is the black majority, led by such groups as the A.N.C. Ultimately the black Africans will win because they will be able to outlast *verkrampptes* re-entrenchment and because they already see through the fraudulent reforms of the *verligtes*. Their unwillingness to tolerate the survival of the corporate capitalist system of apartheid was concisely stated by Steve Biko, shortly before he was beaten to death while in prison, by white policemen in 1977. The liberation movement seeking equality for blacks is also concerned with equality *among* blacks.

27 Editorial, *Financial Mail* (1976) – cited in Litvak, De Grasse and McTigue 1978, p. 35.

28 U.S. Congressional Hearings: U.S. Private Investment in South Africa, 95th Congress, 2nd Session, July 14 and 20, 1978. See Schmidt 1980, p. 82; and Southern Africa, October 1977, p. 12. Also, see Litvak, De Grasse and McTigue 1978, p. 35, and Woods, 1978.

## Popular Culture versus Mass Culture

The only true solution of the contradictions that increasingly characterize the societies of the periphery is a national and a popular one.

SAMIR AMIN (1982)



In 1961, Frantz Fanon observed that a national culture is neither an existing folklore nor an abstract populism.<sup>1</sup> Far from reclaiming the ‘true nature’ or Volksgeist of a people, the formation of a national culture entails the collective effort of a people in the process of redefining itself. Such a movement in Third World countries normally means that indigenous culture becomes a contested focal point of national liberation. Implicit in Fanon’s distinction between popular culture and populism is the still deeper and perhaps more important distinction between national self-determination and nationalism.<sup>2</sup> As demonstrated by the revolutionary cultures presently developing in Central America, Fanon’s distinctions have become ever more pertinent and now need greater elaboration.

This task is especially timely since some sectors of the left have conflated, as well as condemned, national self-determination with nationalism. Perhaps the best-known example involves Rosa Luxemburg’s polemic against Lenin, in which she stated: ‘the famous “right of self determination of nations” is nothing but hollow, petty-bourgeois phraseology and humbug.’<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Marx himself advanced divergent responses to these issues at different times. On the one hand, he wrote that ‘the struggle with the bourgeoisie is at first a national

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1 Fanon 1968 [1961], p. 232.

2 Although my paper is in obvious agreement with a number of points argued by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), my terminology is different in a significant way. Where he uses ‘popular nationalism’, I use ‘popular self-determination’, while where he uses ‘official nationalism’, I use simply ‘nationalism’.

3 Luxemburg 1961 [1918], p. 49.

struggle;<sup>4</sup> while defending Hungarian nationalism in 1848 and Irish nationalism throughout the second half of the century. On the other hand, Marx stated that 'the working men have no country',<sup>5</sup> because the internationalisation of the capitalist mode of production had supposedly stripped workers of their national heritages. As such, he could attack Czech and Croatian nationalism as being counter-revolutionary.

In doing a critique of the reductionist Luxemburgian position, it will be necessary: 1) to distinguish the synthetic framework, dynamic nature, and systematic programme of national self-determination from the contradictory framework, static nature, and eclectic programme of nationalism; 2) to deal with the way in which a progressive national culture, especially in the periphery, Third World countries, is necessarily also internationalist, rather than nationalistic; and 3) to differentiate the organic, collective participation involved in mass-based cultural revolution from the passive consumption intrinsic to a commodity-based mass culture. A major consequence of this discussion should be a better understanding of Ernesto Cardenal's remark that the exploitation of a people economically is also interconnected with the cultural oppression of a people.<sup>6</sup> In an extreme form, this oppression amounts to something approaching cultural ethnocide. Consequently, the internationalisation of the capitalist mode of production has not been accompanied by an internationalisation of culture, so much as by the globalisation of a national mass culture originating in core countries – generally Western, more specifically North American – at the expense of indigenous cultures in the periphery and semi-periphery throughout the non-Western world. As such, we must now recognise the fundamentally divergent ways in which economic underdevelopment and cultural underdevelopment have been imposed on the Third World – a recognition that also has profound consequences for the current debate involving the adequacy of 'dependency theory' as an explication of imperialism.

Differences between the desire for a national culture and the dictates of nationalism are immediately obvious when we survey contemporary Latin America. In Chile, for example, rightist Pinochet's regime has denounced its opponents as being part of the international Communist conspiracy, while also either censoring or publicly disapproving of almost every form of indigenous national culture, from the canto *nuevo* (new folk song) to graffiti-based murals.<sup>7</sup>

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4 Marx and Engels 1971 [1848], p. 92.

5 Marx and Engels 1971 [1848], p. 102.

6 Cardenal 1983, p. 349.

7 Dorfman 1978, pp. 191–6.

Conversely, Pinochet's neo-fascist rule has 'purified' the newly patriarchal Fatherland by means of foreign capital and by way of North American mass media, with the TV show 'Dallas' being a patriotic favourite of Pinochet supporters.<sup>8</sup>

Nicaragua under the Somozas – the same is now true of El Salvador – was characterised by a similar paradox: a suppression of indigenous national culture as intrinsically subversive to the nation, on the one hand, and, on the other, a garnish imitation of U.S. mass culture as somehow being a pure assertion of 'national interests'. As Ernesto Cardenal has stated of the situation in Nicaragua before the revolutionary victory in 1979, native popular culture was 'unvalued, unappreciated, ignored, and marginalised. And when it was not possible to ignore it, persecuted'.<sup>9</sup> Most of Cardenal's own poetry was banned, while the campesino folk art and primitivist paintings produced at Solentiname were periodically confiscated and destroyed by Somoza's National Guard. It was in reference to the imposed art forms of Somoza now rejected by the Nicaraguans as 'Somocista kitsch', that Tomás Borge recently said: 'Beyond many deaths, the torture, the poverty, Somoza left us bad taste – mal gusto'.<sup>10</sup> To which Junta member Sergio Ramirez added: 'What the Somocistas really wanted was to turn Nicaragua into a kind of Miami – which is not really the best cultural tradition of North America'.<sup>11</sup>

During the struggle against Somoza and monopoly capitalism, the Sandinistas did in fact come to consider the reclamation of indigenous culture as a major thrust of their fight for national self-determination. A substantial component of the FSLN's Historic Programme of 1969 was a 'Revolution in Culture and Education' (Part 3), which would lead to developing a 'national culture' and to eliminating the 'neo-colonial penetration' of that culture. In addition, the Sandinista Manifesto called for a rescue of 'the progressive intellectuals and their work from the neglect in which they have been maintained'.<sup>12</sup> Far from simply reviving their collective past uncritically, however, the Sandinistas spoke of greatly enriching this past by synthesising it with such new achievements as the abolition of the 'odious discrimination that women have been subjected to', thus establishing 'economic, political, and cultural equality between women and men'.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, they called for three more things

8 Dorfman 1983, p. 59, pp. 61–3 and p. 68.

9 Cockcroft and Kunzle 1982, p. 53.

10 'The Sandinistas: Interviews with Borge, Cardenal, Ramirez and Ortega', *Playboy*, Vol. 30, No. 9, September 1983, p. 64.

11 Ibid.

12 Marcus 1982 [1969], p. 16.

13 Marcus 1982 [1969], p. 19.

which are antithetical both to official nationalism as it has been known in core countries and to the hierarchical value system upon which this nationalism has been based: 1) they specifically encouraged the revitalisation of local cultural values among ethnic minorities (six percent of the population), such as the Afro-Americans, the Miskitus, the Ramas, and the Sumus, who live on the English-speaking East Coast;<sup>14</sup> 2) they correlated their own re-establishment of national identity with 'the true union of Central American peoples'; and 3) they grounded their own struggle for independence in the international liberation movements of people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, who are engaged in comparable efforts at establishing national cultures in the face of cultural as well as economic imperialism. In other words, the Sandinistas' programme – which they have substantially realised so far – is one which posited a relative autonomy for their own national self-determination in dynamic interchange with international developments towards a radical egalitarianism for all people. It was precisely the Nicaraguan contribution to this historical dialectic between national autonomy and international parity that Ernesto Cardenal captured when he stated: 'Like the French Revolution, which was not only French, but world-wide, the Nicaraguan Revolution is not only Nicaraguan but Latin American and world-wide'.<sup>15</sup> The impetus for Nicaraguan self-determination, then, has presupposed a repudiation of the very nationalistic exclusivity and ethnocentrism that have functioned as the cultural wing of economic underdevelopment in the Third World.

It should be added, of course, that the synthetic interplay of local autonomy and international parity is only intrinsic to progressive movements towards self-determination; it is conspicuously absent from all those Third World movements that are largely revivalist and historically regressive, such as the theocratic absolutism of shiites in Iran or the Sendero Luminoso (Shining Light) guerrillas in Peru.<sup>16</sup> Both of these groups are committed to the revival of a static

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14 Ibid. It is common knowledge that some representatives of the Sandinistas were originally insensitive to the cultural difference of the Miskitus, thus alienating a sector of this minority culture. However, as recent fact-finding groups, such as the American Indian Movement, have demonstrated, the policies of the Sandinistas have now been altered to respect the cultural distinctiveness of the Miskitus. As a Capuchin priest, whose parish includes the Miskitu resettlement of Tasba Pri, recently stated: 'Economic programs are integrating the coast with the rest of Nicaragua. Medical programs teach community responsibility. Cultural programs rediscover what had been lost during the Somoza years'; in Rohmer 1984, p. 31.

15 Cardenal 1980, pp. 17–18.

16 See, for example, Az 1981, pp. 22–30.



tradition, rather than to a dynamic reclamation and extension of their heritage. They are examples of the very nationalism Adorno had in mind when he defined fascism as the undialectical adoption of old forms for entirely new historical needs.

In fact, the origin of these two divergent national directions was contemporary with the genesis of such concepts as 'nation-hood', 'nation-states', and 'nationalism', in the aftermath of the French Revolution. As E.J. Hobsbawm has observed of these early nineteenth-century phenomena:

The 'historic' criterion of nationhood thus implied the decisive importance of the institutions and culture of the ruling class ... But the ideological argument for nationalism was very different and much more radical, democratic, and revolutionary. It rested on the fact that whatever history or culture said ... no people ought to be exploited and ruled by another.<sup>17</sup>

Not surprisingly then, the impetus towards nationhood, which manifested itself so dramatically during the revolutions of 1848, was identified above all with the recovery of one's folk heritage – a heritage preserved much less by the ruling class than by the peasantry, as well as the artisanal sector, and the newly emerging majority of people, the proletariat. The alternative to this new national political consciousness was not, in practice, 'working-class internationalism', but a local awareness of an inconsequential order.<sup>18</sup> Neither then nor now can we speak of class consciousness without recourse to the national context in which it occurs, because there is no such thing as wage-labour in the abstract. Yet to recognise this situation is not to maintain that an emphasis on national self-determination is acceptable without concomitant class internationalism. Just as a relationship to one cannot exist without the other, so the two cannot be considered synonymous without the result being official nationalism. An incisive characterisation of the necessary interdependence of national self-determination and international socialism was made by Friedrich Engels in his 1893 Preface to the Italian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*: 'Without restoring autonomy and unity to each nation, it will be impossible to achieve the international union of the proletariat, or the peaceful and intelligent cooperation of these nations towards common aims'.<sup>19</sup> Ironically, the truth of this position was even acknowledged by Rosa Luxemburg when she wrote

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17 Hobsbawm 1975, p. 90.

18 Ibid.

19 Engels 1971 [1893], p. 75.

that 'under the rule of capitalism there is no self-determination of peoples ... for the bourgeois classes, the standpoint of national freedom is fully subordinated to that of class rule'.<sup>20</sup> In tacitly admitting that such self-determination is in the interests of the exploited classes, Luxemburg totally contradicted her earlier dismissal of 'self-determination' as a mere petit-bourgeois strategem from above to manipulate the masses.

Just as a fetishism of self-determination can lead to nationalism, so the commodification of popular culture transforms it into something else. As Simon Frith, the English rock critic, has observed, mass culture is above all a way of appropriating popular culture, e.g., reggae or soul music, for reasons at once ideological and monetary. In discussing how 'Anglo-American mass music dominates the world more effectively than any other mass medium',<sup>21</sup> and it should be noted here that even in Managua Anglo-American rock music is often heard on Radio Sandino, Frith observed that the pop music of the record industry is intrinsically paradoxical. In one respect, it is a general product of monopoly capitalism – specifically of the mammoth recording corporations – yet, in another regard, it is immediately identified by most people in the world with the national values of the U.S.

Significantly, Harold Rosenberg once noted something comparable about developments in the fine arts since 1945. Far from really being an era of greater internationalism, this period has, he stated, actually experienced the supersession of internationalism by a new 'global academicism' based on Western formalism.<sup>22</sup> Thus, in projecting their own culture-specific concerns onto the international stage, mainstream Western artists have actually helped to displace the international concerns and regional issues of artists in the Third World. In order to appreciate the ethnocentric basis of the process whereby Western formalism has gained such attention, we need only consider the role of the mass media and of corporate funding in drawing attention to mainstream Western art. To quote Rosenberg: 'A modernist painter or sculptor in the most backward country of Africa or Latin America is synchronised with a world system to the same extent as the local refinery or airport'.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, this situation has been approvingly confirmed by major apologists for the priority of contemporary Western formalism. Only three years ago, for example, Clement Greenberg praised Western art as 'the first global urban culture, one

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20 Luxemburg 1961 [1918], p. 51.

21 Frith 1981, p. 7.

22 Rosenberg 1964, p. 211.

23 Ibid.

that intrudes everywhere and threatens to dominate everywhere, among tribal as well as urban people'.<sup>24</sup> In concluding that there is a 'truly international art', but one that 'remains Western art, stays charged from and centered in the West',<sup>25</sup> Greenberg quite implausibly argued that the cultural hegemony of the core countries had little to do with their economic dominance.

While Western High Culture has often been used pre-emptively in the Third World, mass culture emanating from North America has been expressly conceived to eviscerate indigenous national culture in the same countries. It is hardly by chance that some of the most penetrating critiques of mass culture have come from Latin American intellectual Ariel Dorfman. In the classic *How to Read Donald Duck* (1971), for example, Dorfman and Armand Mattelart systematically demonstrate how Walt Disney comics plunder indigenous folk traditions and grotesquely reshape them both to reflect North American images and to accommodate them to the ideological thrust of capitalist values and patriarchal relationships.<sup>26</sup> In Aztecland, as elsewhere, Donald Duck encounters natives who turn out to be nascent Noble Savages with a penchant for innocent laziness and a proclivity to irrational tantrums, people who naively give away all their natural wealth to visitors, so that there can be no question of anyone's robbing them of these riches. Not only is indigenous culture consistently trivialised and denigrated, but ultimately history itself is dissolved. As such, the Third World inhabitants of U.S. mass culture are never heirs to their past, because that past is totally disconnected from this stereotypical present.

This contemporary use of North American mass culture to discredit indigenous national culture is, of course, perfectly in keeping with the origin of mass culture during the early twentieth century. The preconditions for mass culture, namely, the creation of mass consumption and the application of mass media to advertising, resulted from two overriding needs of capitalism as it entered its monopoly stage: 1) vast new markets to allow expanded industrial growth and 2) the desire for cultural hegemony over the worker outside the factory – what one prominent businessman glowingly defined in 1915 as 'the new profession of handling men' and what another business leader labelled in 1919 'the answer to bolshevism'.<sup>27</sup> Because this new mass culture was explicitly designed as a substitution both for existing class culture and national values among new immigrants, it assumed an emphatically judgmental tone culturally. Resistance to the supposedly universal appeals of advertising was dealt with in clearly

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24 Greenberg 1983, p. 161.

25 Greenberg 1983, p. 163.

26 Dorfman and Mattelart 1971.

27 Keller 1919, p. 2.

racial and nationalistic terms.<sup>28</sup> Ads were geared to embarrass new immigrants about their non-American origins and consequently the consumer habits which betrayed them as such. A major champion of this new use of mass media was one Frank Presbrey, who in 1929 boasted: 'To National Advertising has recently been attributed most of the growth of a National homogeneity in our people, and in our ideas'.<sup>29</sup>

Labelled the 'great Americanizer', mass media advertising was said by supporters in the capital sector to have 'a civilizing influence comparable in its cultural effects to those of other great epoch-making developments in history'.<sup>30</sup> What emerged with this new phenomenon in the U.S. was a vision of culture which bound old notions of civilisation to this new stage of capitalism, even as this new mass culture was celebrated as a monument to social progress on behalf of 'the people'. Thus, at its very inception in the early twentieth century, 'mass culture' was not a mass-based development, but a downward projecting populism inimical to pre-existing popular culture. Unlike the sense of empowerment through oppositional self-identity grounded in popular traditions, mass cultural passivity was engineered from above to disempower 'low culture' by either stigmatising it as 'alien to our blood' (to quote Nazi leader Alfred Rosenberg) or by appropriating it in eviscerated form as a basis for further commodification. As such, the recent conflicts between indigenous periphery cultures and the 'universal' standards of North American culture constitute yet another, albeit much more complex, chapter in the use of Western culture to forcefully name 'the masses' as cultural consumers, rather than allowing them to reconstitute themselves as cultural producers.

### Postscript

A debate in the core countries of the West to which the distinction between mass culture and popular culture necessarily relates, although this relationship has been largely overlooked, is the one involving postmodernists and modernists. Sustained confusion about the social genesis of these different cultural tendencies is intrinsic to the populist orientation of much postmodernism. As Kenneth Frampton has noted, the postmodern architects are simply presenting mass media society with gratuitous and sometimes quirky images of itself, even

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28 Ewen 1976, p. 43.

29 Presbrey 1929, p. 613.

30 Presbrey 1929, p. 608.

as they claim to have introduced a new dynamic into architecture.<sup>31</sup> Nowhere is this more obvious than in a major manifesto of postmodernist architecture, *Learning From Las Vegas* (1972), in which Robert Venturi, Denise Brown and Steven Izenour polemicise against the elitism of modernist architecture (or rather the global academicism of the 'international' style). Professing a 'positive non-chip-on-the-shoulder view'<sup>32</sup> of casinos and nightclubs like Caesar's Palace, the authors conclude that learning from Las Vegas (and MacDonald's, and Holiday Inn, etc.) is a 'way of being revolutionary for an architect'.<sup>33</sup> In starting with the assumption that buildings which generate popularity using middle class values are examples of popular culture for all classes, Venturi, Brown and Izenour make the 'non-elitist' discovery of a whole new aesthetic with untapped vitality and unrecognised complexity. Not surprisingly, this 'new' vocabulary of forms has an affinity with nineteenth-century eclecticism and is notably enhanced by the 'antispatal' nature of the twentieth-century suburban autescape. Seeing the profusion of neon along the nightlife strips and the 'nonrepressive' lack of public planning in Las Vegas as a new aesthetic discovery, Venturi, Brown and Izenour praise this 'pleasure-zone architecture' as more liberating than a misguided modernism. The future greatness of North American and even world architecture (in their 'non-imperialist' view, of course) will presuppose an assimilation by the fine arts of 'silent-white-majority architecture'.<sup>34</sup>

Critic Charles Jencks has since given the Venturi thesis added currency in a number of apologia. In one such study, Jencks has mentioned that postmodernism advances a classicism unmarked by classes, with Robert Venturi's own use of a Mickey Mouse Ionic Order (at the Allen Art Museum of Oberlin College) being exemplary.<sup>35</sup> Owing to the 'pragmatically motivated' basis of it and to his contention that 'mass-culture has opened classicism to the masses', Jencks is quick to observe that postmodernism has stripped the spectre of Fascism from the classical tradition.<sup>36</sup> In sum, then, postmodernist architecture, while 'radically schizophrenic by necessity',<sup>37</sup> is pluralistic, eclectic, ad-hocist, irrational, and unafraid of pervasive national symbols.

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31 Frampton 1983, p. 19.

32 Venturi, Brown and Izenour 1972, p. 3.

33 Ibid.

34 Venturi, Brown and Izenour 1972, p. 154.

35 Jencks 1980, p. 6.

36 Jencks 1980, p. 5.

37 Jencks 1977, p. 24.

As should be clear, then, the populism of postmodernist architecture contravenes any organic popular traditions composed from below, as well as the synthetic framework whereby progressive cultural redefinition has begun in Third World countries. Furthermore, the patrons of postmodernist architecture are prominent representatives of the Western capital sector – the most famous postmodernist building to date, designed by Philip Johnson, is the headquarters of the A.T.&T. corporation on Madison Avenue in New York – whose hierarchical position in the arts is ironically being confirmed by an overture to mass culture à la Warhol and Pop. More than anything else, postmodernist architecture is a revived Newport Rhode Island Aesthetic, with its new-found extravagance being even more eclectically orchestrated. Instead of being simply a pastiche of different periods in the High Culture of the West, as was the case with the Imperially plundered abodes of robber barons like Morgan and Vanderbilt, postmodernist architecture is a *mélange* of all that and more, namely, a ‘non-elitist’ inclusion of mass culture. Nor is it fortuitous that the current social context for this postmodernist extravagance features the revived nineteenth-century rationale for an earlier and more primitive stage of capital accumulation, which is stridently promoted by the Reagan administration. In turn, this ideological justification for a ‘purer capitalism’ is connected to the extraordinary new redistribution of wealth in the U.S. by means of more anachronistic class relations here and in keeping with the ultra-imperialist stance being adopted elsewhere in the world. Far from exorcising the ‘spectre of Fascism’, postmodernist culture more often evokes what preceded it. Furthermore, it seems less than coincidental that the dean of postmodernist architects, Philip Johnson, was both a supporter of the Nazis and a major force in the elimination of progressive social ideas from the Bauhaus programme when it was imported to the U.S. in the 1930s as the ‘international’ style. In this regard, we should again recall the distinction between the national self-determination of some Third World popular movements and the nationalistic thrust of populist revivals in core countries, especially those which try to assert mass cultural developments as being universally good.

By underplaying the degree to which early avant-garde groups were concerned with incorporating popular culture into the idiom of modernity (the influence of peasant colours and sometimes imagery on the Russian Constructivists or Léger, the artisanal standards of traditional woodcarving assimilated by the ‘peasant’ sculptor Brancusi, to name only a few instances), as well as the ideological transformation of modernity into ‘purist’ modernism, the semi-official style of corporate capitalism, postmodernists are able to render their populist appeals more plausible. In the process, modern mass culture and the mass media – which have had a substantial amount to do with the global vis-

ibility accorded modernism – are glibly passed off as ‘radical’ new artistic elements. Lost in the pseudo-conflict of purist modernism and populist postmodernism, both of which are endemic to the West, is the only profound alternative to either: a truly Internationalist synthesis drawing heavily on indigenous popular cultures that have always existed in a state of real conflict with both mass culture and global modernism.

## Hegemonic Art History

The division of labour not only seizes upon the economic, but upon every other sphere of society as well.

KARL MARX<sup>1</sup>



A major contradiction of conventional art historians is their oppressively uniform way of presenting what they continually label unique. Almost every commercial art book begins with characterisations of art as above all categories, beyond all systems. Once these exclamations are made, however, we usually discover the text to be yet another pedestrian tour of dryly documented terrain, relieved only by an effusive praise for the ‘exquisite’ and the ‘ineffable’. Simultaneously, we are earthbound by atomised empiricist data, while being told to look ever skyward. All promises aside, though, none of these orthodox studies provides us with an exit from the paradox of mainstream art history – a paradox involving facts divorced from ideas and ideas dislodged from material conditions. Before looking closely at contemporary art historical studies, we must first examine the social relations of the art historians who write them.

It is of more than passing significance that the discipline of modern art history arose along with and in the context of the monopoly stage of capitalism. Indeed, the complex and hardly fortuitous relationship of this phase of capitalism with specific traits of contemporary art history reveals a number of things about the nature of each. Today art history entails above all else *specialisation* – on an artist, a school, a medium, a period – what Walter Friedlaender used to call ‘conquering a province’.<sup>2</sup> This assertion of special rights is always done in an empiricist vein, which is supposed to be as scientifically modern as it is judiciously compatible with old-time humanism. The present state of the discipline has been aptly noted by Colin Eisler, who wrote several years ago:

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<sup>1</sup> Marx 1977 [1867], Vol. 1, Chapter 14.

<sup>2</sup> Steinberg 1972, p. 315.



[A]rt historical scholarship has, by and large, addressed itself to highly specific, narrowly defined, questions to which a 'Right' or a 'Wrong' answer can be found. We have moved away from ... the murky depths of art theory into the unambiguous, but occasionally intellectually arid reaches of who? what? where? when? how? but with a minimum of why?<sup>3</sup>

Art history then is not only specialised so as to deny historical breadth, it is also formulated so as to preclude historical depth. There are of course within the mainstream a few neo-Hegelian opium eaters who evoke a certain period ambience, although they leave material social relationships within this rarefied realm very much to our imagination. Nonetheless, the differences within art history between sober empiricists and *Zeitgeist* idealists is not substantial. At most the two groups merely give different inflexions to the same underlying premises. Panofsky himself, a *Zeitgeist* deviant, conceded as much when he wrote that it was 'a blessing to come into contact – and occasionally into conflict – with an Anglo-Saxon positivism which is, in principle, distrustful of abstract speculation'.<sup>4</sup> Both positions are based on implausible preconceptions about the nature of history. Empiricists (or positivists) automatically relegate history to an unimportant backdrop. Neo-Hegelian idealists immediately regard history as omnipresent yet ineffable. In spite of recent overtures towards social history and in the name of pluralism, mainstream art history remains premised on the same view: *history is guilty of irrelevance until proven innocently relatable to art*. This position remains fundamentally positivistic even when connections between art and history are documented.

When we ask *why* all those art historians so prideful of their individualism manage to do things which are in monotonous conformity to the limits established by conventional art historians, we are necessarily led to the social relations of the present system which none of them can escape. Nothing, for example, so distinguishes modern western society – especially in its monopoly capital stage – as the type and degree of specialisation within its division of labour.<sup>5</sup> During the late eighteenth century, capitalism started changing from its accumulation stage of exchanging surplus products to its industrial stage of directing everything toward the production of commodities for exchange. At this time, a radical new reorientation of social relations and the forces of

3 Eisler 1969, p. 605.

4 Panofsky 1955, pp. 329–30.

5 Since Marx only wrote about capitalism while it was in its competitive stage, my discussion of monopoly capitalism is greatly indebted to later economists: Baran and Sweezy 1966; and Braverman 1974.

production occurred. In a famous discussion, Adam Smith noted how making a pin had been broken down into 18 different operations, often by 18 different workers – a division of labour *within* the workplace that was unprecedented in human history. A logical outgrowth of this new development was that the organic wholeness of the artisanal tradition was replaced by mechanical work both fragmented and streamlined, which simultaneously narrowed the nature of labour itself yet expanded the quantity of commodities producible by means of it. As early as 1853, John Ruskin protested against the social and aesthetic consequences of this trend when, in *The Stones of Venice*, he wrote:

We have much studied and perfected, of late, the great civilised invention of the division of labour; only we give it a false name. It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men: divided into mere segments of men – broken into small fragments and crumbs of life; so that all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin, or the head of a nail.<sup>6</sup>

Only with the transition to monopoly capitalism at the turn of the century, however, did the implications of this division of labour become most manifest. With such developments as the institution of Frederick Taylor's principles of 'scientific management' during the first half of the twentieth century, the modern clerical or white collar office worker appeared on the scene.<sup>7</sup> From being less than three percent of the labour force around 1900, clerical workers have become around twenty-five percent of the labour force in the U.S. today – a percentage which makes the clerical classification comparable in size to that of any other occupational category within the labour force. (A major result of this trend has been the further mystification of differences between surplus-producing clerical workers and surplus-consuming clerks, so that both – as part of the white-collar work force – are erroneously grouped together as part of the working class). This dramatic change is tied to, among other things, the systematic application of Taylorism within the managerial sector of industry, involving what Aronowitz has called the 'industrialisation of the office'.<sup>8</sup> Because scientific management is based on a divorce between the conception and the execution of a job, as well as on the ever greater concentration of knowledge in

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6 Ruskin 1853, p. 165.

7 Frederick Taylor's major works were: *Shop Management* (1903) and *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911). See Braverman 1974, pp. 85–123.

8 Aronowitz 1974, p. 301.

the corporate executive, the organisation of the managerial sector has spawned more and more piecemeal tasks for non-supervisory clerical workers without any overview of the jobs they perform.

It does not take much imagination to realise that a unique trait intrinsic to monopoly capitalism – the clerical office worker – is directly connected to the role of conventional art historians, however, pronounced the differences between the two in terms of status (although not necessarily class since there are non-surplus producing clerks). Now most art historians are really art clerks who, in spite of the fact that they have some self-determination, are content to collect data, marshal facts, assemble research, and shuffle information, without ever asking: what is the conceptual framework for this technical labour and how does it relate to the social process as a whole? As Leo Steinberg noted a few years ago, art history is geared towards producing methodical archivists, whose concern is ‘the kind of data that should only be scanned, processed, and indexed for convenient retrieval.’<sup>9</sup> As such, art historians scientifically manage themselves, as well as their catalogues of facts, by exchanging real self-determination for professional recognition, monetary rewards, and a glamorous intellectual status inaccessible to clerical workers within the present hierarchy of labour. In this way, the discipline of art history is itself disciplined.

For all their clerical skills, and perhaps even alienations, however, art historians are elevated above the clerical workforce. On a daily basis clerical workers, such as secretaries, perform tasks conceived by supervisory art historians. Because of the privileges to which they have access – especially in education – all art historians are part of the dominant middle class, whose material interests they often share and whose ideological interests they frequently advance. In this regard, we must remember that those who represent clerical workers as a ‘middle class’ are confusing technicians with technocrats. Art clerk historians and their ever-specialised work confirm Marx’s observation that the new division of labour not only characterises the economic process as a whole, but all spheres of society as well. To a considerable extent, though, the modern art historian is a new social phenomenon peculiar to the intelligentsia within monopoly capitalism, namely the ‘intellect-worker’. As economist Paul Baran has observed, what distinguishes the intellectual from the intellect-worker is the intellectual’s commitment to the entire historical process – a commitment that necessarily includes a self-reflexive attitude toward his or her conceptual framework; a self-consciousness concerning the impossibility of class neutral-

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9 Steinberg 1972, p. 307.

ity; an understanding of why, not just how, history is interpreted as it is; an ability to think synthetically about the system as a whole.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, the intellect-worker is one who turns empirical data into an empiricist ideology, who operates on the basis of a hidden metaphysics that dissolves history into discreet units, who thinks only in an analytical mode.

By functioning in a way analogous to the clerical worker, except in a more exalted position, the intellect-worker helps maintain and legitimate a system based on the further consolidation of the division of labour. This in turn will insure the continued proliferation of clerical workers and the extension of those privileges enjoyed by, among others, the intellect-worker. Ironically, the conventional art historian's intellectual efforts become fragmented into intellect-work as part of the system which secures his or her privileges. Hence, we return to the widely, sometimes painfully, acknowledged specialisation of modern art historians. Even though this specialisation is effected by the sheer volume of knowledge continually accumulated, as well as by a misplaced imitation of science, the narrowness of art historical studies is unquestionably related to the inner dynamics of advanced monopoly capitalism. Furthermore, the connections between art historians and monopoly capital have become increasingly consummated in an official sense by the large number of exhibitions that are catalogued by art historians and financed by corporate executives.<sup>11</sup> At last, the intellect-worker has made the transition from indirect privileges to direct payments, from a functionalist approach to functionary activities, from submissive independence to subservient peerage. The only stage not yet realised is an Exxon-backed exhibition of commercial textbooks by 'Emerging Art Historians'.

It is very important, however, that we not see modern art history as *merely* a reflection of the social relations intrinsic to the mode of production in monopoly capitalism. Such determinism could not explain the oppositional currents within the discipline, like this caucus or the fairly sizeable number of progressive critiques in art history. In contrast, it would be inadequate to claim that conventional art history is *merely* a result of false consciousness on the part of the individuals who write it. Any parade of personalities – even of those being incriminated – would misplace our focus. An incisive way of avoiding the monolith's concept of determinism, while also avoiding the voluntarism of conspiratorial individuals, is by using Antonio Gramsci's view of class 'hegemony'.

10 Paul Baran 1969, p. 8.

11 Craven 1981a, p. 25: From 1965 to 1979 the increase in corporate spending went from 22 million dollars to 435 million dollars, with over 200 of the largest corporations having art collections selected by 'professional art consultants'.

As Gramsci observed, the ruling class does not stay in power solely by economic leverage or police force, but also by persuading the exploited to accept the cultural beliefs and moral values upon which the system itself is based.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in order to understand the complex relationship between hegemonic art history and monopoly capital, we must focus on a type of thought which has *both influenced and been influenced by* the social relations grounded in the new division of labour. Only by dealing with the dynamic interchange between one-dimensional thinking and constrictive material conditions can we illuminate how conventional art history enjoys hegemony without being systematically enforced in an overt way.

As Adorno, Marcuse, and others in the Frankfurt School have shown, post-Enlightenment society has experienced a restrictive redefinition of the limits of reason itself.<sup>13</sup> From being a mode of self-realisation interdependent with society as a whole, synthetic reason has been reduced to a specialised formal procedure that can be socially isolated into what we call 'rational understanding'. While reason in the most profound sense is both a precondition for and a result of human freedom, 'rational understanding' freely operates in exploited and exploitative circumstances. When limited to being a technique for understanding, reason becomes a simplistic tool for empirically verifying what 'is', without addressing how it came to be or what it is likely to become as part of the historical process as a whole. This reification of reason into one-dimensional understanding is based on an implausible use of science. From being a way of empirically describing natural phenomena in quantitative terms, science has been transposed into historical interpretations that are necessarily qualitative, never merely natural, and certainly not neutral. The result of this untenable transition from the empirical approach of the natural sciences to the empiricist ideology of a 'scientific' approach to history has been the suppression of the historical process in favour of random facts with only documented interconnections.<sup>14</sup> Here we should recall Gramsci's observation that history can neither be academically reinterpreted nor politically transformed without passion and partisanship in the 'war of positions'.<sup>15</sup>

12 Gramsci 1971, pp. 12–13, 55–60, 261–4, 416–18. Although Gramsci left no extended essay on hegemony, these passages (along with others) are very insightful and seminal. For a concise overview of his work, see Joll 1977.

13 See, for example, Adorno and Horkheimer 1972 [1944]; Marcuse 1954 [1941]; and Marcuse 1964.

14 Thompson 1978, pp. 4–5: Thompson distinguishes the 'necessary empirical dialogue' from 'empiricism'.

15 Gramsci 1971 [1931–5], p. 418. Marx, unlike later Stalinists, recognised the implausibility of

As should be clear, the division of reason into isolated areas is interrelated with the division of labour into fragmented parts. It is very revealing that both developments entail pseudo-scientific ventures. One involves the supposedly scientific establishment of knowledge, the other involves the so-called scientific management of labour. Both diminish what it means to be human by limiting what can be thought. Both are peculiar to our historical period and intrinsic to monopoly capitalism, while being instrumental in establishing the accepted parameters of mainstream art history.

Significantly, however, conventional art historians draw, either implicitly or explicitly, on traditional humanism to justify their actions on behalf of 'humanity in general' – a justification contradicted by their own reduction of art history to a dehumanised formal procedure. This paradox is the necessary result of a discipline still exalted for its intellectual importance, even as it has become a species of intellect-work limited to clerical skills. Thus, appeals to traditional humanism are used to secure social legitimacy for the anti-social aims of hegemonic art history. Were conventional art history seen for what it is, it would be recognised as generally unrelated to history and largely irrelevant to humanity. Nonetheless, there is some legitimacy to the evocation of traditional humanism by orthodox art historians. Even though conservative humanists like José Ortega y Gasset have attacked the 'barbarism of specialisation' now endemic to art history, these same traditional humanists have ignored the material progression of the historical process in favour of the 'universal human condition'.<sup>16</sup> Yet the gulf is really not so great between this so-called universal human condition – that is blind to exploitative situations – and a positivism that neutralises these same inequalities by appealing to a sterile homogeneity of facts. Neither the traditional humanists nor the modern day positivists are *rationaly* addressing 'the human condition', except through a slim variant of understanding predisposed to misunderstand. Before the world economic system as we know it is radically changed in a material sense, no one can really speak convincingly of human beings universally related through certain social conditions. Until then, humanism in the profoundest sense will remain an idea as yet unrealised, to which conventional art history is an ideological barrier.

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a 'science' of history and used a dialectical approach to it, which, while empirically grounded, was not merely scientifically verifiable. Marx wrote: 'A distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic, or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out' (Marx 1999 [1859]).

16 Ortega y Gasset 1932.

## Art History and the Challenge of Post-Colonial Modernism

Asymmetrical pairings sometimes serve to trigger a reassessment of common concerns in the visual arts. Such was the case in issue 56 of *Third Text*, which contains two notable articles that are implicitly at odds with each other. This occurred despite the fact that no debate between the two had been intended. One article by Ihab Hassan on the views of the distinguished art historian Barnard Smith recalled his arguments about the 'Australianness' of Australian art (and also its Europeanness as well), along with Smith's belief in the separate-ness of Art History as a discipline.<sup>1</sup> (The latter field should, Smith maintains, be limited to four areas of analysis regarding art objects: identification, classification, aesthetic evaluation, and interpretation.)<sup>2</sup> The other article in the same issue, by acclaimed Cuban art critic Gerardo Mosquera, was about current re-evaluations of art from Latin America (now often misnamed as 'Latin American art'). He discussed this work as 'an art without surnames' that has emerged outside the 'ghettoised circuits' of essentialism based on European 'stylistic' taxonomies.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, Mosquera also noted that sometimes art from the West is itself *Latinamericanised* within a dialogical situation in which there is a global switch of positions between 'centres' and 'peripheries', between metropolitan centres and artworld colonies – or between the 'mainstream' and so-called 'regional enclaves'.<sup>4</sup> Any adequate approach to such heterogeneous and 'unclassifiable' artworks resulting from the inverted process described by Mosquera is thus multidisciplinary and postcolonial, and unavoidably also questions the hegemony of Euro-Northamerican canons of art history. The conflict between these two conceptual frameworks confronts us with an intriguing problem. Does the future of Art History reside in retrenchment so as to preserve the field's 'seriousness' (to quote Smith), or must Art History be re-conceptualised so as

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1 Smith 1971, p. 8; 'it may be said that Australian art is European art flourishing in the South-East Asian World'.

2 Hassan, 2001, p. 4.

3 Mosquera 2001, p. 27.

4 Ibid.

to broaden its analytical scope and to strengthen its explanatory clout at a moment of acute 'globalisation'?

The answer rests more with the latter position than with the former one of Bernard Smith. In order to counter the monolithic and quite homogenising 'stylistic' category of *Formalesque* – which is used by Smith for all modern art up to the 1960s (and presumably *Post-Formalesque* for what ensued) – I do two things in the response that follows.<sup>5</sup>

I reconsider the history of *formalism* – or rather of *formalisms* – in a less Eurocentric way, so as to restore a sense of the unevenness and discontinuities that are repressed in Smith's narrow narrative. By looking at how in 1928 Mikhail Bakhtin and P.N. Medvedev already wrote of different and even anti-thetical forms of formalism (some that were Eurocentric, some that were not), or of how Rudolf Baranik from the 1960s onward insisted upon calling himself a 'Socialist Formalist' as opposed to, say, a mainstream formalist like Greenberg, we can see one thing rather clearly.<sup>6</sup> Bernard Smith's use of the term 'Formalesque' is far too reductive to be of any real analytical use when applied to Modernism and 'abstract art' from 1880 to 1960 even in Europe, much less elsewhere. I also outline a series of recent methodological shifts that now account quite justifiably for the current disuse in Art History of 'stylistic analysis' (a monological approach still embraced by Smith), in favour of the more satisfactory model of 'visual languages' (which posit a dialogical relationship in the visual arts). Like the first, the second examination of Bernard Smith's rather contraining and brittle 'art historical' approach will force us to reckon with an unavoidable state of affairs in relation to postcolonial theory at the beginning of the twenty-first century: *the most profound Art History at present is more than just Art History*.

The most effective way to respond to the position of Bernard Smith being presented by Hassan (who is, nevertheless careful to reject any of its residual 'Marxism') is simply to revisit Smith's ambitious 1998 book *Modernism's History*. In that sweeping but also severely limited study, Smith first coined the clumsy and rather mannered term 'Formalesque' as an overarching way to categorise Modernism and also 'abstract art'. His rather mainstream argument is one part neo-Greenbergian and one part 1930s 'social realist', with a delayed debt to the Cold War thesis about purportedly hegemonic 'abstract art' identified with Serge Guilbaut et al. of the 1970s. Smith's contention goes as follows:

5 See also: Smith 2002, pp. 65–70.

6 On this, see: Craven 1996b, pp. 194–5.



By the ... 1950s, the dominance of the Formalist tradition in Western European culture ... has peaked and almost run its course. Signs of what is now called, inelegantly, Postmodernism were already floating in the intellectual air. In this study I shall seek to trace the sources and outline the history of formalism that gave [Eric] Auerbach and [Ernst] Gombrich unease. From the viewpoint of the late 1990s it is possible to see that what they viewed as modern is now no longer so ... In my view it is a part of history, part of a major period style that I shall call *Formalesque* ... The object of this study ... is to trace the course between c. 1890 and c. 1960 of the suppression of the realist/naturalist tradition by formalism ... In my view the courses of the drive toward formalism, and ultimately towards abstraction, lie deep in the historical conditions of the 19th century when Europe was colonial master of the world, and the style-cycle, which is still called Modernism, was fully formed.<sup>7</sup>

Several problems immediately surface here. For one, his claim quickly founders on the quite untenable assertion that Modernism 'reflected' the conquests of European colonialism. In fact, the opposite was much more true than what Smith implies here while ostensibly attacking 'Eurocentrism'. Indeed, Smith cites Meyer Schapiro's celebrated 1937 essay 'The Nature of Abstract Art' (a sharp critique of Alfred Barr's catalogue at MOMA, *Cubism and Abstract Art*) on page five of *Modernism's History*, as if he himself were merely advancing and refining Schapiro's viewpoint. Yet, the exact opposite is actually the case. Indeed, Schapiro's still serviceable essay deftly disallows most of what Smith has so baldly asserted. For example, Schapiro refuted Barr's overly generalised and ahistorical 'survey' of Modern Art by pointing out that there were many different types of 'Abstract Art', which often contradicted each other, that all 'Abstract Art' was not 'Formalist' to the same extent or in the same way, that Modernism was not simply the converse of so-called Realism, and that Modern Art had from the beginning emerged as a key critique of European colonialism, along with the semi-official Neo-classicism that represented the Western conquest worldwide.

In discussing the rise of avant-garde art and the counter-cultural tendencies that helped spawn Modernism, Schapiro spoke of the anti-colonial and anti-hegemonic logic of this dissident art as follows:

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7 Smith 1998, pp. 4–5.

The new responsiveness to primitive art was evidently more than aesthetic; a whole complex of longings, moral values and broad conceptions of life were fulfilled in it. If colonial imperialism made these primitive objects physically accessible ... By a remarkable process the arts of subjugated 'backward' peoples, discovered by Europeans in conquering the world, became aesthetic norms to those [in the avant-garde] who renounced it. The imperialist expansion at home was accompanied by a profound cultural pessimism [in the West] in which the arts of the 'savage' victims were elevated above the traditions of Europe. The colonies became places to flee to as well as to exploit.<sup>8</sup>

Based on the generalisations above, grouping the essentially uniform 'nature' of 'abstraction' and Modernism under the rubric of 'formalism', Bernard Smith then followed this position to its logical consequences within the framework of mainstream Western-based art historical practice. Thus, he concluded:

I shall suggest ... that it [Modernism] may be conveniently divided into an early, avant-garde, Formalesque (c.1890–c.1915), a mid-Formalesque (c.1916–c.1945), and a late or high Formalesque (c.1945–c.1960) ... the discipline of art history cannot be sustained without periodisations. The time has come to periodise the twentieth century. If it is to survive as a distinct discipline, art history will have to retain confidence in its capacity to create those generic period styles which have served it so well in the past: Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque, Rococo, and so forth.<sup>9</sup>

This unduly general, *neo-Zeitgeist* way of treating – and also homogenising – 'history' helps us to underscore the corresponding mis-assumption of Smith that 'it is to the fifteenth [century] that we must look for Europe's first avant-garde'.<sup>10</sup> Any stringent look at the emergence of avant-garde in the West – and elsewhere, for example, in Latin America with *Modernismo* during the

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8 Schapiro 1978 [1937], pp. 200–1. Significantly, this keen insight of Schapiro, not the less tenable counter-claim of Bernard Smith, served more readily as an antecedent for one of the 'postcolonial' positions that led to the foundation of *Third Text* in 1987. On this, see the landmark essay by Rasheed Araeen in *Third Text* no. 1, in which he noted that: 'About thirty years ago in Karachi I was introduced to modern art ... I became so fascinated by the "progressive" aspect of modernism that I decided to devote my life to its pursuit. Yet no one would deny the rigour of Araeen's critique of Western culture.'

9 Smith 1998, p. 5. See also: Greenberg 1971, pp. 171–4.

10 Smith 1998, p. 22.

late nineteenth-century or in India with Calcutta Modernism painting during the 1920s – immediately alerts us to something. There was a new link here between avant-garde art and counter-hegemonic cultural practices of a type that simply did not exist before the rise of industrial capitalism in the late eighteenth century. Following Raymond Williams in *Culture and Society, 1790–1950* (1959), no one has addressed this issue more astutely and with more historical precision than did Renato Poggioli in his indispensable book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, in 1962. He noted how avant-garde movements beginning in the early nineteenth century were fundamentally unlike earlier schools of artists, in, say, the Renaissance or Baroque Periods. This is so because of the oppositional attitude towards existing social institutions evinced by vanguard artists, most of whom were linked to utopian socialism. To quote Poggioli:

The passing beyond the limits of art, the aspiration toward what the Germans call *Weltanschauung* [a world view or ideological program] is perhaps the principal characteristic by which to separate what we call movement from what we call schools ... It was Malraux who observed that the origins of modern art coincided with the artist's repudiation of bourgeois culture [in the name of social change].<sup>11</sup>

Recognition of the radical divide separating avant-garde movements and Modernist visual languages from all previous period styles, whether Romanesque and Gothic or Baroque and Rococo, helps us to appreciate how the uneven nature of historical change first discussed by Marx made the world a different place. As such, the fragmentation of Western society through heightened class conflicts, intensified colonial hierarchies, and a destabilising process of capitalist modernisation, which caused 'all that is solid to melt into air' destroyed forever the old conceptual model – so dear to mainstream art historians – of a so-called harmonious 'period style' for any culture or nation after 1789. Furthermore, this more sophisticated materialist understanding of art history as a multi-directional and discontinuous delta, rather than as a straight and narrow *Camino Real*, makes any belief in a so-called 'period style' after 1800 quite impossible. At best, one can only talk of many competing artistic tendencies or visual languages, both hegemonic and subaltern, at once Western and non-Western, in addition to being either colonising or postcolonial, all of which attest to the contradictory, as well as unresolved, nature of any modern 'period' in art history.

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11 Poggioli 1981 [1962], p. 18.

Finally, before concluding this response to Bernard Smith and Ihab Hassan, I need to enumerate a few more points that demonstrate how much more nuanced art history has become in a methodological sense in recent years. First, contrary to what Smith innocently assumed in his writings, there is no such thing as Formalism in a singular sense. Rather, there are various types of formalism, as Mikhail Bakhtin and P.N. Medvedev observed already in the 1920s when, in a little known essay about Historical Materialism, they counterposed European Formalism with Russian Formalism. To quote these two Russian Marxists, as a consequence of anti-positivist European Formalism concerning *Kunstgeschichte ohne Namen*, even more than Russian Formalism of that period:

Whole worlds of the new forms of Eastern art were opened to the European artistic consciousness ... This extraordinary expansion of the concrete world of art ... [contradicted] the concepts and definitions developed by art scholarship on the basis of European art, which was primarily realistic. In the process of assimilating the new and extremely varied forms of 'alien art', it was the constructive aims of art that grew more and more clear ... The formalists thereby reduced form and content to a common denominator ... The ideological centre was [thus] merely transferred from the object of representation and expression, taken independently from the work, to the work's construction itself.<sup>12</sup>

More recently, Richard Wollheim built on this necessary set of distinctions when in 1995 he traced 'four kinds of Formalism': Normative Formalism, Analytic Formalism, Manifest Formalism, and Latent Formalism, with the tacit understanding that *all art is formalist* in one sense or another.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, *all art is abstract*, since all art involves an ideologically mediated set of conventions (whether intentional or not), so that it would be naïve to rigidly distinguish, in any binary manner between 'Abstract art' and so-called 'Realist art' (the latter is an idea that Malraux rightly dismissed as the 'neutral style fallacy'). Denying that 'Realist art' is also abstract art is as implausible as saying that any art can ever be non-ideological or claiming that any art can ever go beyond being a visual language that necessarily *translates* an experience of reality (rather than just 'reflecting' that experience). A brilliant explication of these various points is to be found in *Las ideas estéticas de Marx* (1965)

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<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin and Medvedev 1978 [1928], pp. 52–7.

<sup>13</sup> Wollheim 1995, pp. 7–8.

and other widely circulated writings by Mexican philosopher Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez (who has been a major influence on Gerardo Mosquera, as well as on cultural policy in revolutionary Cuba more generally).<sup>14</sup> Nor is it by chance that Bernard Smith's dismissiveness towards 'postcolonial' theory has unfortunately led him to neglect the key writings of non-European-based critics, art historians and theorists such as Sánchez Vázquez or Partha Mitter (and so many others from Latin America, Asia and Africa), in favour of antiquated figures like Sir Ernst Gombrich – whose best work was coeval with the British Empire, along with its aftermath, and in the spirit of Western positivism.

Even the use to which Bernard Smith insists on putting the term 'style' has become passé in contemporary art historical practice at its most savvy, owing to the work of Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and the Birmingham University Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. But even Heinrich Wölfflin (whose work has been brilliantly re-assessed of late by Martin Warnke, Germany's greatest living art historian) was aware that the term *VISUAL language* – which he employed as early as 1915 in *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe* – was superior to the term 'style' when speaking of 'art history without names'.<sup>15</sup> As Wittgenstein noted about the same time, there is no such thing as a 'personal language', although one can still speak of a 'personal style' and of a subcultural 'style', as does Dick Hebdige, in his fine study of dissident young *subcultures* and their slang during the Thatcher years. To quote Hebdige:

The meaning of subculture is, then, always in dispute, and style is the area in which the opposing definitions clash with most dramatic force ... Kristeva's interests seem to coincide with our own: the positioning of subordinate groups through *positioning in language*.<sup>16</sup>

Owing to its far more limited application and dissident place within a larger culture, as well as in relation to a national language, the term 'style' now belongs much more in the domain of micro-cultural studies than in the macro-analytical field of art history. The latter discipline still does have an ongoing commitment to analysing *formally* both 'visual languages', on the national or institutional level, and their idiomatic sub-language offshoots, (such as 'outsider art') along class, gender and ethnic lines. Thus, if art history can no longer periodise those cultures by stylistic categories as Smith would have us believe,

14 Mosquera 1986, pp. 23–37. See also: Camnitzer 1994, pp. 127, 136, 331–2.

15 Wölfflin 1950, p. 12: 'Painterly [Baroque] and draughtsmanly [Classical] are like two languages'.

16 Hebdige 1982, pp. 3, 120.

this discipline nevertheless must deal critically with the 'visual languages' and discourses of nation-states and national institutions, in addition to the competing artworks of *resistant subcultures* in response to a 'national culture'. The latter sub-groups often reuse and re-inflect 'official' visual languages with a different 'style' to counter mainstream artworks by engaging with them critically. Any art historical approach along these advanced 'postcolonial' lines will no longer deal simply with the so-called 'unity' of a period in history, but also with its discontinuities both in the arts and in society more generally. Moreover, *formal analysis* of several varieties will probably be crucial to disclosing the structural logic of any art object – and so will an understanding of the abstract codes being released syntactically and semantically within the visual languages articulating a given artwork. Among the important gains of the latter approaches could well be a new sense of the 'Brown Pacific' in which Australia is situated, to go along with Paul Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic', out of which modern British art and culture have emerged.

## C.L.R. James as a Critical Theorist of Modernist Art

The earliest studies of the post-colonial were by such distinguished thinkers as Anwar Abdel Malek, Samir Amin, and C.L.R. James ... And indeed, one of the most interesting developments in post-colonial studies was a re-reading of the canonical cultural works, not to demote or somehow dish dirt on them, but to re-investigate some of their assumptions, going beyond the stifling hold on them of some version of the master-slave binary dialectic. This has certainly been the comparable effect of astoundingly resourceful novels such as Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the narratives of C.L.R. James, the poetry of Aimé Césaire and of Derek Walcott ... The idea of rethinking and reformulating historical experiences which had once been based on the geographical separation of peoples and cultures is at the heart of a whole spate of scholarly and critical works.

EDWARD SAID, *Orientalism* (1979)<sup>1</sup>

Histories of cultural studies seldom acknowledge how the politically radical and openly interventionist aspirations found in the best of its scholarship are already articulated to black cultural history and theory. These links are rarely seen or accorded any significance. In England, the work of figures like C.L.R. James and Stuart Hall offers a wealth of both symbols and concrete evidence for the practical links between these critical political projects ... Modernity might itself be thought to begin in the constitutive relationships with outsiders that both found and temper a self-conscious sense of Western civilisation.

PAUL GILROY, *The Black Atlantic* (1993)<sup>2</sup>



Few defining figures of the twentieth-century are as famous and as unknown as C(yril) L(ionel) R(obert) James (1901–89). In certain circles he is widely recog-

1 Said 1979, pp. 349–51.

2 Gilroy 1993, p. 6 and p. 17.

nised as the author of two legendary texts almost thirty years apart – *Black Jacobins* (1938) and *Beyond a Boundary* (1963). The first book was a groundbreaking study of the revolutionary anti-colonial movement among the slaves in eighteenth-century Haiti that would itself become a prologue to the national liberation movements throughout the Third World that exploded on the international scene from the 1940s through the 1990s. The second, equally groundbreaking book, was a comprehensive examination of the aesthetic and social dimensions of the sport named ‘cricket’ that showed how a ruling class sport in the United Kingdom was very much one of the popular classes in former colonies like Trinidad. Yet these two commanding books, plus the fame of James as a political theorist of ‘Black Marxism’, have sometimes served to eclipse other important studies about various topics by the same author. The Renaissance-like range of C.L.R. James has not been duly acknowledged, owing to how his notable success in a few areas, such as political theory, sociology and political activism, have been circumscribed by what José Ortega y Gasset once called the ‘barbarism of specialisation’ in modern society.

To date, though, mainstream art history, cultural studies and visual culture have had almost nothing to say about the equally precocious contribution by C.L.R. James to rethinking modernism in the visual arts – aside from the above-noted references by Edward Said and Paul Gilroy, plus a few others by Kobena Mercer and Paul Buhle, as well as Keith Hart and Anna Grimshaw.<sup>3</sup> This neglect of James as a theorist in the arts is hardly surprising, since most Western intellectuals continue to assume in the most ethnocentric manner that writing about theory is a prerogative of European and Euro-American thinkers alone. What Edward Said has rightly noted of the late Michel Foucault could be asserted with equal force about most post-modernists in the Western world: ‘[Foucault] showed no real interest in the relationships his work had to feminist or post-colonialist writers facing problems of exclusion, confinement, and domination. Indeed, his Eurocentrism was almost total, as if “history” itself took place only among a group of French and German thinkers.’<sup>4</sup>

In fact, for many ‘post-modernists’ and ‘post-structuralists’ even now, any analysis of art from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean must be mediated by Western theory alone. It is as if an international division of labour – such as that which exists worldwide within the ‘globalisation process’

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3 See, for example, certain passages in Mercer 1994; the study by Buhle 1988; and also the fine introductory essay in Grimshaw and Hart 1993. As for a recent look at the importance of C.L.R. James to literary studies see Emily Eakin, ‘Embracing the Wisdom of a Castaway: The Left-wing critic C.L.R. James’, *The New York Times*, 4 August 2001: A15, 17.

4 Said 2002, p. 196.



of corporate capitalism – dictates that, while the Third World can produce art and culture, it is the West alone that enjoys monopoly control over the production of theory about art and culture. As such, non-Western art functions as a ‘raw material’, while Western theory is seen as a highly processed ‘finished good’ that emerges from the theoretical transformation of the ‘rudimentary resources’ mined by the Third World labour force of artists and cultural workers. This was the view unwittingly announced in 1992 by W.J.T. Mitchell even when he stated that his position was exactly the contrary:

If the balance of *literary* trade has shifted from the First to the Second and Third Worlds, the production of *criticism* has become a central activity of the cultural industries of the imperial centres ... they are in the paradoxical position of bringing a rhetoric of decolonisation from the imperial centre ... We ought to resist the notion that this relationship merely reflects the traditional economic relations of imperial centres to colonial peripheries.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, this misguided, if well-intentioned ‘dependency theory’ of how Western criticism purportedly ‘explains’ non-Western art in what is posited as a ‘theoretical void’ in the Third World, *is utterly disallowed by the case of C.L.R. James*. (And there are many others, such as Sergio Ramírez, Paulo Freire, Frantz Fanon, Samir Amin, Rasheed Araeen, Partha Mitter, Chinua Achebe and Nestor García Canclini.)<sup>6</sup> The ignorance demonstrated by Mitchell (and other Westerners for whom French post-structuralism almost alone seems to qualify as ‘theory or criticism’) rudely cancels out any avowals of ‘solidarity’ with post-colonial leaders and anti-imperial movements. Such a lack of knowledge concerning non-Western contributions to critical theory was not acceptable a decade ago, whether one lived in the West or in a post-colonial nation, and it is even less tolerable now.

By reclaiming and consolidating the intervention of C.L.R. James into art theory, as I begin to do here, we will gain new insights into post-colonial modernism’s transnational origins, cosmopolitan character and delta-like trajectory. As such, no future discussion of modernism’s multinational import will be adequate without the challenging commentary of James about the panoramic nature of certain paradigmatic works by Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock in dialogue with non-Western artistic practice. Among other things, the art the-

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell 1995, pp. 475–80.

<sup>6</sup> For a definitive refutation of W.J.T. Mitchell’s ‘dependency theory’ conceptual framework see Araeen, Cubitt and Sardar 2002.

ory of James should open up new insights into the previously under-recognised discursive significance of Picasso and Pollock to artists from Latin America and the Caribbean. The 'dialogic role' in art history – in opposition to one of mere 'dependency' on the West – played by the artworks of Picasso and Pollock, whether in Cuba, Martinique or Nicaragua will also emerge more emphatically as a consequence of C.L.R. James's broad and left-wing look at the pictorial logic of cosmopolitan modernisms.<sup>7</sup> By reversing analytically the flow of theory from the imperial West to a 'dependent' post-colonial periphery like Trinidad, we can come to appreciate more deeply just how profound the multinational dialogue along theoretical lines about topics like modernism *always has been and no doubt will ever more become*. C.L.R. James and other Third World critical theorists of the twentieth century were, of course, relatively few in number compared to those from the West proper, but the legacy of James will no doubt foster an even more transformative dialogic process in the future.

James corresponded about art and politics in the 1950s with his friend, art historian Meyer Schapiro – a relationship never before mentioned in the art historical literature.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, James wrote two remarkable critical essays about the fine arts from the West and he also made many incisive comments about the visual arts in passing within other essays devoted to topics ranging from Caribbean popular music to West Indian cricket. There was one essay published in James's lifetime about Picasso (and Michelangelo, as well as Greek statuary), which appeared in a 1977 volume of his selected writings, while a highly original piece that James wrote in 1980 on Picasso and Pollock remained unpublished in his lifetime. It is this latter essay on which I will focus in the '*explication du texte*' that follows.<sup>9</sup> In discussing the transnational role of Pollock's all-over paintings, James points out how these images functioned, qua visual language, as generative indexical fields replete with integrative signs for humanity in general, not just Westerners in particular. In his arresting, anti-Greenbergian assessment of Pollock's works, James used a fresh philosophical approach based in structural homologies.

Yet, the novel position of James will assume more explanatory clout only if we anchor his critical theory of modernism as embodied in Pollock within the distinctively unorthodox variant of Marxist thought for which James has become well known. Two analytical manoeuvres are in order here. First, we must reconstruct James's concept of art as it surfaced in a couple of key essays –

7 See, for example, Craven 1999, pp. 9–32; and Craven 2002, pp. 96, 98–9.

8 James 1992, pp. 237–40.

9 James 1992, pp. 405–10.

'The Artist in the Caribbean' (1959) and 'What Is Art?', from *Beyond a Boundary* (1963). In the latter book about the aesthetic dimensions of cricket we will encounter, for example, celebrated passages on batting techniques and performative styles in cricket that help to explain why James so deeply admired the 'action paintings' of Pollock. Second, we will address the original way in which James has used the dialectical method, more in keeping with the 'dialogic' aesthetic of Mikhail Bakhtin, than with any recycling of a Zeitgeist-driven neo-Hegelianism. Along the way, I show how the trans-cultural cosmopolitan modernism of James's theory exists within a larger critical tradition throughout the Americas, one that extends from José Carlos Mariátegui to Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez. It will be clear that there is no dearth of noteworthy critical theory from the Third World and that modernism's cosmopolitan character can best be grasped by learning about this generally overlooked philosophical tradition from outside the West's mainstream.

### The Nature of Art from a Post-Colonial Vantage Point

In 1959, James spoke in Jamaica on the campus of the University of the West Indies about how 'an analysis of the artist in the Caribbean properly done was a pointer to the general social and political Problems there'.<sup>10</sup> The title of his talk was 'The Artist in the Caribbean' and in it he deftly outlined a multi-point perspective for doing a critique of any artwork. James emphasised how artistic practice is both a form of labour and the extension of a language, so that it simultaneously serves as a mode of cognition that 'adds to the sum of knowledge of the world' and yet also expands our concrete sensory engagement with specific things 'by that economy of means ... [that] adds new range and flexibility to the medium'.<sup>11</sup>

On the one hand, James refused to reduce art to a mere reflection of existing society (as did Soviet aesthetics) or to a simple act of 'language speaking itself' without individual agency (as would structuralists like Barthes and the early Foucault). Yet, on the other hand, while emphasising that 'artistic production is essentially individual', James also warned that one should not place 'undue emphasis on the great, master artist', since 'the great artist is the product of a long and deeply rooted national tradition'. Moreover, all things are not possible at all times, so that a great artist is most likely to appear 'at a moment of

<sup>10</sup> James 1977, p. 183.

<sup>11</sup> James 1977, p. 185.

transition in national life with results that are recognised as having significance for the whole civilised world'.<sup>12</sup>

Here, though, we need to distinguish James's crucial emphasis on a popular-based 'national life' from any type of official nationalism. Grounded as it is in languages and media as a precondition for important artworks, the national life is inherently opposed to official nationalism, such as that of the British Colonial Empire, which James rightly saw as undermining any significant art on behalf of humanity per se, in favour of narrow class-based ethnic interests. In this way, James adroitly linked internationalism, not with nationalism, but with national self-determination (whether in the West Indies or Ghana, both of which, in the 1950s, were then in the process of winning it through anti-colonial struggles against Great Britain). Thus, he could conclude of Cézanne – 'who gave a new direction to modern painting' – (as well as of Shakespeare the dramatist and Aimé Césaire the poet) that 'the universal artist is universal because he is above all national'.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, James concluded:

A supreme artist exercises an influence on the national consciousness that is incalculable. He is created by it but he himself illuminates and amplifies it, bringing the past up to date and charting the future ... Such a writer is a pole of reference in social judgment, a source of inspiration in concept, in language, in technique (not always beneficial), to succeeding generations of artists, intellectuals, journalists, and indirectly to ordinary citizens ... The Greeks and the Florentines of the great period understood the direct, the immediate influence of the great artist upon the society in which he lived. But today in particular he is a tremendous force while he lives, and particularly to people like us, with our needs ... In the age in which we live and in the present social and political stage of the underdeveloped countries, we cannot leave these (and other) matters to an empirical growth that took centuries to develop in other countries. We cannot force the growth of the artist. But we can force and accelerate the growth of the conditions in which he can make the best of his gifts.<sup>14</sup>

Along these lines, James could see the greatness of Shakespeare as originating with a dialogical interplay of professional letters and popular culture, involving 'the marriage of native English with the Latin incorporations'. An

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> James 1977, pp. 184–5, 187.

Englishman of yeoman lineage, Shakespeare was someone 'for whom thought and feeling were always experienced in terms of nature, the physical responses of human beings and the elemental categories of life and labour. This is the basis of his incomparable vividness and facility of expression'.<sup>15</sup> In a related vein, James could praise his contemporary Aimé Césaire for the cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic nature of his dialogical approach to modernist poetry and also for its emancipatory vision on behalf of a post-colonial Caribbean. To quote James: 'The finest piece of writing that to my knowledge had come from the West Indies is a poem which bears the significant title, *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*. It is the desperate cry of a Europeanised West Indian poet for integration with his own people'.<sup>16</sup>

This set of observations places us in a position to appreciate two of the most innovative and enduring features of C.L.R. James's art theory in relation to reception theory, as well as to popular participation in artistic production. As Kobena Mercer has rightly noted of James, he possessed an elective affinity with the position of Bakhtin and Valentin Volosinov in two key respects. First, James had a subtle sense, as did the two Russian theorists, of the 'multi-acculturality of the ideological sign' within the production of artistic meaning. Signification itself is thus a site of negotiation and even of contestation. Second, James operated, as did Bakhtin, with a commitment to a 'dialogic principle' in which the possibility of social change is prefigured in collective consciousness by the multiplication of critical dialogues.<sup>17</sup> Similarly the radically democratic conceptions of both Marxism and socialism that James advocated for several decades found a clear analogue in his emphasis on post-vanguard (and post-Leninist) modes of artistic practice. This feature of James's critical theory in art and culture was noted by Paul Gilroy when, in praising the popular 'practice of antiphony' within African American (and English) culture, he wrote: 'Its best feature is an anti-hierarchical tradition of thought that probably culminates in C.L.R. James's idea that ordinary people do not need an intellectual vanguard to help them speak or to tell them what to say'.<sup>18</sup>

Significantly, James incorporated into his theory both a belief in the notable role of popular dialogue with professional artists and a disbelief in any populist reduction of art to a monologue by the lay public for the arts. The crucial

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15 James 1977, p. 184.

16 James 1977, p. 189. For similar praise of Aimé Césaire by a leading European modernist poet, see the remarks of surrealist leader André Breton, who called *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal* 'nothing less than the greatest lyrical monument of this time'.

17 Mercer 1994, p. 62.

18 Gilroy 1993, p. 79.

importance of the dialogical interplay of high art and popular culture could not be used legitimately to dumb-down or de-skill the very real and quite worthwhile challenges posed by the mastery of artistic media in the arts, along with the visual languages linked to them and the specific form of highly-skilled labour necessary for realising them. Accordingly, specialised knowledge both of the fine arts and popular culture respectively would be a prerequisite for any fundamental critical engagement with all artwork genuinely worthy of human development. This insight helps us to understand the highly nuanced and quite technical discussion of the nature of art found in James's excellent contribution to aesthetics proper. After all, James was emphatic (as was Bakhtin in the 1920s) about the centrality of a type of formalism to his critical approach: 'it is the question of the medium which at the present time is crucial ... The artist is a human being who uses usually one, sometimes more than one medium of communication with exceptional force and skill'.<sup>19</sup>

How did formalism relate more specifically to James's approach? He himself gave an eloquent answer in 1963 through his celebrated book on cricket, *Beyond a Boundary*, which contained a chapter entitled 'What Is Art'. In the passages I cite below, James elaborates with uncommon range, not only upon the aesthetic dimension of a sport, but also upon the nature of aesthetics as such:

Cricket is first and foremost a dramatic spectacle. It belongs with the theatre, ballet, opera, and the dance ... [a] major consideration in all dramatic spectacles is the relation between event (or, if you prefer, contingency) and design, episode and continuity, diversity in unity, the battle and campaign, the part and the whole. Here also cricket is structurally perfect ... In addition to being a dramatic [art], cricket is also a visual art. This I do not pitch too low at all. The whole issue will be settled here ... The aestheticians of painting, especially the modern ones, are the greatest advocates of 'significant form' ... the late Mr Bernard Berenson ... distinguished two qualities which could be said to constitute the significance of the form in its most emphatic manifestation. The first he called 'tactile values' ... This significance in the form gave a higher coefficient of reality to the object represented. Not that such a painting looked more real, made the object more lifelike. That was not Mr Berenson's point. Significant form makes the painting life enhancing, to the viewer ... [Similarly] Mr John Berger of the *New Statesman* ... claims that what is really significant in Michelangelo is his bounding line. The abstract artists get rid of the

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19 Gilroy 1993, p. 183. See also Wollheim 1995.

object altogether and represent only the abstract form, the line and relations of line. If I understand Mr Berger aright he claims that all the great representational paintings of the past live and have life only to the degree that their form is significant ... The second characteristic of significant form in Mr Berenson's aesthetic is the sense of 'movement'. Mr Berenson discussed the artistic possibilities and limitations of an athletic event, a wrestling match ... Now here all of us, cricketers and aestheticians, are on a familiar ground. I submit that cricket does in fact contain genuinely artistic elements, infinitely surpassing those to be found in wrestling matches ... I submit finally that without the intervention of any artist the spectator at cricket extracts the significance of tactile values ... [and] the purely artistic appeal, the significant form at its most unadulterated is permanently present. It is known, expected, recognised and enjoyed by tens of thousands of spectators. Cricketers call it style. Steel's definition clears away much cumbersome litter about left shoulder forward and straight bat: 'no flourish, but the maximum of power with the minimum of exertion'. If the free-swinging off-drive off the front foot has been challenged by the angular jerk through the covers of the back foot, this last is not at all alien to the generation which has experienced *Cubism in posters and newspaper advertisements ... Each in its own way grasps at a more complete human existence* [my italics].<sup>20</sup>

The concluding observations in James's discourse on art take us back to some central tenets of classical Marxism, then bring us forward to a signal thesis of Mikhail Bakhtin. Indeed, several of the symptomatic points explicated below make clear just how much James's account presupposes many of the fundamental concepts with which Marx and Engels (though not necessarily Soviet-style Marxist-Leninism) situated themselves in relation to art, labour and human nature. A salient trait of James's approach is his deployment of a non-normative formalism, concerning how the major artist 'adds new range and flexibility to the medium', which overturns the normative formalism of Greenberg et al., with its a priori usage of a reductive and essentialised 'medium purity' to which the artist is supposedly limited. The latter is essential for a Eurocentric version of modernism, just as the former put forth by James is significant for a non-Eurocentric discussion of cosmopolitan modernisms. Here again a crucial link with the theoretical vantage of Bakhtin is located in James's implicit distinction between an ideologically informed non-normative formal-

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20 James 1992, pp. 318–20, 326.

ism and an ahistorical, purportedly non-ideological brand of formalism, one so important for mainstream Western theory.<sup>21</sup>

What James then did was to assume that non-normative formalism, ever in a state of historical formation, is a formative social force precisely because of its progressive character as a form of human labour. By expanding what can be humanly sensed by the five senses beyond the crude practical aims and instrumental ends of the status quo, art actually becomes a major means of recreating human nature through the creative advances of formalism in the arts. Such a view presupposes a classical Marxist sense of humans being more well rounded and multidimensional than capitalism would allow – or, to quote James, possessing the potential for a ‘more complete human existence’.

In terms that serve as a precondition for James’s above-noted discussion of art, the ‘humanist’ early Marx famously summed up the socially formative role of formal values in the arts:

Just as music alone awakens in a person the sense of music, and just as the most beautiful music conveys no meaning to the unmusical ear ... because the meaning of an object for me goes only so far as my senses go ... [so] for this reason the senses of the social person are *other* senses than those of the non-social person. Only through the objectively unfolding richness of humanity’s essential being is the richness of subjective *human* sensibility (a *musical ear*, an *eye for beauty of form* – in short, *senses* capable of human gratifications, senses confirming themselves as essential powers of humanity) either cultivated or brought into being ... The forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire world down to the present.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly, just as James emphasised the centrality to art of the ‘physical responses of human beings and the elemental categories of life and labour’, so both Marx and Engels wrote of art as a natural form of labour, of labour as a shaper of human nature. In *Das Kapital*, for example, Marx observed that ‘First of all, labour is a process between humans and nature. In this process, humanity mediates, regulates, and controls its material interchange with nature by means of its own activity’. Thus, he concluded that ‘In acting upon nature outside of itself, and changing it, humanity thus changes its own nature also.’<sup>23</sup> In consolidating this contention of Marx (and subsequently

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21 Bakhtin and Medvedev 1978 [1928], pp. 41–53.

22 Marx 1964, pp. 140–1.

23 Marx 1973 [1867], p. 53.



of James), Friedrich Engels wrote of the paramount importance of skilled labour for the arts (as well as for sports or popular culture) and for human development in the broadest sense:

Labour is the source of all wealth ... But it is even infinitely more than this. Labour is the prime basic condition for all human existence, and this to such an extent that, in a sense, we have to say that labour created humans themselves ... the hand is not only the organ of labour, it is also the product of labour. Only by labour adaptation to ever new operations, by inheritance of the thus acquired special development of muscles ... by the ever-renewed employment of this inherited finesse in new and more complicated operations, has the human hand attained the high degree of perfection that has enabled it to conjure into being the paintings of a Raphael, the statues of a Thorvaldsen, the music of a Paganini.<sup>24</sup>

Revealingly, for James and for Marx or Engels, the on-going existence of class-based hierarchies, whether in the arts or in society, should never be linked to some populist diatribe that underestimates differences in artistic skills or intellectual advances. Rather, hierarchical social structures, including the arts (as opposed to genuine differences in levels of technical virtuosity within the arts per se) were linked by James, Marx and Engels to the socially debilitating consequences resulting from the division of labour in the workplace within capitalism – along with the international division of labour in transnational terms still based in the current legacy of colonialism. In their visionary commitment to a ‘more human future’, Marx and Engels laid the groundwork for what James would then develop so effectively into his art theory. For all three thinkers, the arts would become at once more ‘fine’ (or subtle) and more popular – but not more populist – when there occurred a supersession of divisive capitalist labour practices through the democratisation of the workplace via *autogestion*.

Such a post-capitalist and post-colonial future predicated on the radical democratisation of society as a whole was discussed by Marx and Engels in a manner that also helps to illuminate James’s own insistent concern in art theory with a dialogue in the present between professionals and amateurs, or intellectuals and the popular classes:

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24 Engels 1973, pp. 54–5.

The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass of people, which is bound up with this, is a consequence of the division of labour [under capitalism] ... In any case, with a communist organisation of society, there disappears the subordination of the artist to local and national narrowness, which arises entirely from division of labour, and also the subordination of the artist to some definite category of art ... In a communist society there are no painters, but at most people who, among many other activities, also paint.<sup>25</sup>

Here, though, we must emphasise that the critical theory produced by C.L.R. James did not simply reproduce classical Marxist positions – however rich the critical dialogue with the thought of Europeans like Marx and Engels (or Bakhtin, who often identified with western Asian thought, more than European thought). The ‘Black Marxism’ of James produced something new, for all of its dialogic intercourse with Marxism per se, that both opposed Eurocentrism (that is, the privileging of European thought at the expense of other traditions) and drew upon European philosophy to construct a more cosmopolitan critical theory along post-colonial lines.<sup>26</sup> As Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart have rightly noted, for example, ‘The originality of the *Black Jacobins* derived from James’s fusion of Marxism with the colonial struggle of blacks in the New World and Africa. This perspective also informed *A History of Negro Revolt*, a synoptic review of the intimate link between industrial capitalism and black resistance over two centuries.’<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, in opposition to orthodox Marxist-Leninists from the West and the Soviet Bloc or even Communist China, James defined *post-colonial socialism* as ‘the extension of democratic principles into the sphere of production’.<sup>28</sup> In sum, then, for James, formal advances in the arts, both fine and popular, were grounded in a radically democratic sense of human wholeness that in turn necessitated a disalienated, self-determining labour process whereby humanity could construct itself through creating artworks, as well as everything else it produced.

What fresh methodological approach would allow these interlocking issues to be grasped in a single set of artworks? James’s summation of his own method as ‘dialectical’ and ‘materialist’ not only permits yet another appreciation of

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25 Marx 1970, pp. 108–9.

26 See Amin 1988.

27 Grimshaw and Hart 1993, p. 9.

28 Grimshaw and Hart 1993, p. 20.

his theoretical affinity to Bakhtin's conception of the 'dialogic', but it also allows us to see how he was able to posit a profound, new alternative view for assessing the paintings of Jackson Pollock. James did so by refusing to see Pollock's images as being reducible either to an *art of affirmation*, as did mainstream critics like Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, or to an *art of negation*, as have critics on the left from John Berger and Peter Fuller to T.J. Clark and Peter Wollen. Instead, James explained how Pollock's artwork was extremely important precisely because of the way it concretely combined the affirmative and the negative into a uniquely generative pictorial image, thus also expanding the communicative resources of the medium itself in a manner replete with extra-aesthetic ramifications.

In his best-known book on his own heterodox methodological approach, *Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity* (1947), C.L.R. James wrote as follows:

Over a hundred years ago, Hegel said that the simplest reflection will show the necessity of holding fast the positive in the negative, the presupposition in the result, the affirmation that is contained in every negation, the future that is in the present ... [But] Hegel complicated the question [of dialectics] by his search for a closed system embracing all aspects of the universe; this no Marxist ever did ... Quite different is the mode of Marxism. It understands its own logical laws [self critically].<sup>29</sup>

### Jackson Pollock as Cosmopolitan Modernist

Upon his death in Brixton in 1989, C.L.R. James left unpublished among his papers a five-page essay entitled simply 'Picasso and Jackson Pollock'. He had composed it in 1980 for a letter to a friend in Chicago named Sara Devine, whom he had met as a labour leader and political activist in the USA. James wrote the letter from the West Indies, while he was living in the headquarters of the Oilfield Workers Trade Union in Trinidad – a fact with intriguing implications, given Jackson Pollock's own long-time, left-wing affiliations to the labour movement in the USA. This study appeared posthumously during 1992 in Anna Grimshaw's exemplary compilation entitled *The C.L.R. James Reader*.<sup>30</sup>

29 James 1992, pp. 161, 154.

30 James 1992, pp. 405–10.

The essay, which features an awe-inspiring yet effortless grasp of world culture almost *in toto*, is marked by nimble turns of phrase, elegant incisiveness, and a luminous sense of humanity that make clear why James is one of the most commanding thinkers of the twentieth century. Perhaps characteristically, he began the essay with both considerable confidence and a matching sense of humility, so as to lodge a thoughtful set of insights and yet welcome dialogue or debate from the public about them. His essay started as follows:

When I was in Washington some months ago, a friend of mine took me to see some pictures by Jackson Pollock. They interested me. I bought some books and spent a long time over them. I have now come to the conclusion that the paintings of Picasso dominated the first half of the twentieth century and that the painter of the second half is Mr Jackson Pollock. Now this may sound very strange because I am an amateur when it comes to painting, but I have spent many hours on this business ... The range I bring to these works is not comprehensive, but rather wide ... I have seen the Pollocks at the Museum of Modern Art and I must say that when I left the room where they are and passed *Guernica*, a painting which I have admired and seen any number of times, *Guernica* looked dull to me in comparison with the blazing impact that the Pollocks had just made on me.<sup>31</sup>

These seemingly off-hand, if deeply felt observations, immediately alert us to how several apparently conventional remarks are anything but that. Rather, these value judgements are actually markers in a discursive field that James himself did much to shape so deeply in the domain of theory. Above all, we need to understand that by the general term 'dominated painting', a standing which James attributed to both Picasso and Pollock, there is no standard agenda to characterise either artist as a Nietzschean-like *Übermensch* towering above mainstream art within a 'great man theory of history'. Rather, James's use of the term 'dominated' for an artistic medium here signifies something much closer to what Michel Foucault identified as the 'trans-discursive' position of Freud and Marx in modern Western thought. In 'What Is an Author?', Foucault wrote: 'Freud is not simply the author of *The Interpretation of Dreams* or of *Wit and the Unconscious*. Marx is not simply the author of 'The Communist Manifesto' or *Das Kapital*. Both Freud and Marx have established a possibility for further discourse'.<sup>32</sup>

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31 James 1992, pp. 405, 409–10.

32 Foucault 1975, p. 611.

And, on this score, James's point is a crucial one. Both Picasso and Pollock do in fact occupy virtually unsurpassed trans-discursive positions within twentieth-century cosmopolitan modernisms. Few if any other artists from the West generated a broader field of discursive interchange than did Picasso as co-inventor of cubism, as originator of the collage, as the first international (and anti-colonial) voice in the dialogic interchange of an Afro-European character, and as the author of *Guernica*, the most well-known protest painting of the twentieth century (which even today makes a fragmentary appearance at almost every major demonstration, whether anti-war or anti-fascist, worldwide). As James himself put it so succinctly, 'Picasso and Braque come from Cézanne and African Art ... [and] Picasso's high peak is *Guernica*'.<sup>33</sup>

As a stalwart figure in the anti-colonial movement, C.L.R. James knew well the enormous importance for national liberation movements of Picasso's dialogic visual discourse with African and African American, as well as Asian and Latin American artists – from Wifredo Lam of Cuba (whom he mentored) and Aimé Césaire of Martinique (with whom Picasso collaborated on a series of prints) to such contemporary artists as Abdelali Dahrouch of Morocco (who has written of Picasso's cosmopolitan modernism as a significant decolonising antecedent for North African artists), Rasheed Araeen of Pakistan (who has noted how Gauguin and Picasso helped to shift Western art away from 'its ethnocentric tradition of Greco-Roman classicism'), Armando Morales of Nicaragua (one of whose prints about anti-Imperialism for the *Saga of Sandino* series is based on *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*), and José Fuster of Cuba (who emphasises Picasso's ongoing centrality to the anti-colonial visual discourse that remains of paramount importance to the Caribbean).<sup>34</sup> As a result, then, of the counter-hegemonic and transnational discursive field that Picasso helped

33 James 1992, p. 407. Because of such things, however, as the use of African art by right-wing artists like Maurice Vlaminck (with political views at odds with those of Picasso), James then says: 'I don't intend to spend any time here on African art and its influence on French painting because, waiting for us there, is a morass of debate and confusion'.

34 Interview with José Fuster by the author, Jaimanitas (a suburb of Havana), Cuba, 7 November 2003.

In fact there is a replica of Picasso's *Guernica* – specifically linked with the cause of anti-fascism and anti-imperialism, in downtown Havana on a public billboard prominently seen from one of the main highways. In the course of our conversation, Fuster (after acknowledging the enormous importance of Picasso's trans-cultural paintings for his own painted ceramics) declared: 'El bloqueo actual estadounidense es la *Guernica* de Cuba'.

On Picasso's anti-colonial visual discourse and its impact on North African artists see, for example, Dahrouch 1993, pp. 13–24.

to generate, thus validating art from Africa qua art on equal dialogic terms with the fine arts of Europe, African culture itself was often afforded greater parity with Western culture even before decolonisation had fully succeeded. Such was the message of political theorist Amílcar Cabral from Guinea-Bissau in a 1970 speech entitled 'National Liberation and Culture':

In spite of colonial domination (and perhaps even because of this domination), Africa was able to impose respect for her cultural values. She even showed herself to be one of the richest of continents in cultural values ... in works of art as well as in oral and written traditions ... The universal value of African culture is now an incontestable fact.<sup>35</sup>

Something similar could be claimed about the trans-discursive position of Pollock, who, as art critic Robert Hughes once noted, 'was mined and sifted by later artists as though he were a lesser Picasso'.<sup>36</sup> From there, Hughes also went on to observe something else in 1982 of considerable significance for approximating the main premise of James's article about Pollock's interplay of negative and positive forces in his *oeuvre*. About the multi-ethnic basis of Pollock's visual language, Hughes wrote: 'It now seems that Pollock was eager to wind so many elements together, not out of some empty eclecticism ... but in the belief that cultural synthesis might redeem us all ... Pollock's career was one of the few great models of integrating search that our fragmented culture can offer'.<sup>37</sup>

But, let us return directly to the essay by James and how he developed methodologically the thesis for his above-noted conclusion. To quote James on this matter: 'There are two fundamental elements that meet. First there is the work of art itself. Secondly, there is the mind you bring to it'.<sup>38</sup> Thus, he showed that he was as concerned with the production of art as with the reception of it – that is, as much with the subject of production (supposedly the main modernist interest) as with the production of the subject (the avowed aim of much post-modernist criticism). By combining a focus on both of these ideological problems, James advanced to a post-colonial understanding of each in relation to the other, rather than being restricted to a constraining preoccupation with

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35 Cabral 1973, p. 50. As for the most important discussion of Picasso's anti-colonial and anti-imperialist politics in relation to his dialogic usage of African Art, see Leighton 1990, pp. 604–30.

36 Hughes 1992, p. 217.

37 Hughes 1992, p. 220.

38 James 1992, p. 405.

one or the other. Similarly, James was quick to question the professional interpretation of artwork, whether by scholars from the West or the Eastern Bloc, even as he did the same for the populist views of the 'ordinary public'. Instead, a new type of critical encounter between the two would be featured in his dialogic approach.

Perhaps not surprisingly, James began his essay with a prefatory excursus in the realm of literary masters, where he was not just 'an amateur', as was supposedly true of his status as a commentator on the visual arts. What he found in the orthodox Shakespeare scholarship, both East and West, was an insistence upon a reading of Shakespeare's *King Lear* as an embodiment of 'total disillusionment with society', as if human nature itself were on trial. In taking issue with this mainstream view, James singled out here – as he did earlier in the above letter to art historian Meyer Schapiro – that elements of resistance to any such total resignation constituted a notable counterweight to this standard tragic reading of the 'human condition'.<sup>39</sup> Conversely, in surveying the literature on Alexander Pushkin, the Russian writer who 'has no equal in European literature', James discovered the opposite problem, namely, the conventional wisdom that the poem *Bronze Horseman* was an apology for monarchy. Yet, contrary to the received wisdom here, James points out a symptomatic 'negative' passage concerning the repudiation of monarchical power that precludes any placid view of the palace in society.<sup>40</sup>

At this place in his essay, James moved from letters to images. He did so while underscoring that major artworks are neither unreservedly up-beat or resolutely resigned. To recall the related observation of Herbert Marcuse, 'Compared with the often one-dimensional optimism [or pessimism] of propaganda, art is permeated with pessimism, not seldom intertwined with comedy'.<sup>41</sup> With a witticism worthy of the topic, James switched to an analysis of the interplay between the affirmative and negative within the Renaissance paintings by Leonardo da Vinci: 'The lady with the smile has distorted the appreciation of Leonardo. The ordinary public is not aware that in the last twenty years of his life, Leonardo painted a world being overcome'.<sup>42</sup> The opposite is of course the case with Michelangelo, since 'It might seem that his last word as a painter was stated in the *Last Judgement*, the death of civilisation'. Such an easy conclusion is contradicted, however, by the later frescoes in the Cappella Paolina, according to James. In the latter paintings, 'Michelangelo was saying that in

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39 James 1992, p. 406.

40 Ibid.

41 Marcuse, 1978, p. 14.

42 James 1992, p. 406.

young people with some experience there was the possibility of re-building a world in which truth and justice would emerge over destruction'.<sup>43</sup>

He next advanced with equal fluency to addressing 'the painters of our time'. Beginning with the anti-Renaissance pictorial logic of the Impressionists, who 'went back to nature', James observed critically how, 'Nature, they thought would give them all that was required, but nature didn't'.<sup>44</sup> His critique found a ready analogy with Georg Lukács's criticism of 'naturalism' for its lack of 'typicality' and its theoretical innocence concerning the manner in which nature is always mediated by a visual language, and unavoidably inflected with subjectivity. A recognition of this naïve approach to nature and language is precisely what permitted the advent of modernism (which James calls 'modern painting') in the work of Cézanne and Picasso, each of whom understood the dual character of modernist art as both mediating agent and as self-critical cultural assessor. It is instructive to note at this point that James's view was more sophisticated than that of, say, Foucault, since for the Trinidad author, art was both about the representation of the means of artistic representation (as claimed by Foucault) and also about the testing of these same means of representation in relation to extra-linguistic forces (something Foucault, following Ferdinand de Saussure, did not succeed in doing, unlike Bakhtin).<sup>45</sup>

The synthesis of nature (meaning the 'elemental categories of life and labour') with a multi-ethnic language forged from European and African traditions is what ultimately led to Picasso's masterful *Guernica*, which James admired perhaps more than any other painting of the twentieth century. Yet in this unpublished piece on Picasso and Pollock from 1980, James seemed to amend his earlier view of *Guernica* that appeared in print in 1977.<sup>46</sup> In the first article, James contrasted Picasso's painting with the pedimental sculpture for the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, as well as with Michelangelo's last frescoes at the Vatican. About the sculpture from ancient Greece, James wrote:

[T]he Ancient Greek saw, and we see today, the human fighting with the animal instincts in man. The magnificent figure of Apollo shows that the Greek is very certain that civilisation will win ... In the *Guernica*, a contemporary mural, the human is stripped to the elementary need to

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43 Ibid.

44 James 1992, p. 407.

45 Eagleton 1996, pp. 101–2.

46 James 1977, pp. 226–34.



survive, and, in the presence of the bull, the need to propagate. Everything else is complete confusion, crisis, and catastrophe ... all mankind is now subjected to destruction from bombing planes, an imaginative glimpse of the future.<sup>47</sup>

The unease James felt in 1977 for this painting, his admiration for Picasso's anti-fascism and anti-imperialism notwithstanding, returned more noticeably in the 1980 essay. Upon further reflection, James decided that *Guernica* actually attested to a lack of deep faith in any post-imperial and post-colonial world, despite Picasso's own avowed stand on this issue as a socialist. Accordingly, James pitched the problem as follows: 'The decisive question from our investigation is that Picasso could not make up his mind about the human personality ... Like all great artists, Picasso was aware of the antagonistic forces in human nature'.<sup>48</sup> In grappling with this question about Picasso, James first noted the bankruptcy of professional art history in confronting these issues. Nevertheless, he then conceded his own, quite different, reservations about the social signification of this well-known painting. His justified critique of the literature then led into a critique of *Guernica*:

[I]n his book on Picasso (1975), Mr [Timothy] Hilton, in a work obviously aimed at putting Picasso in his place (not the place which the world had given him) says of *Guernica* (p. 246): 'Nobody knows what is going on in it' ... I have not to answer here. Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people know ... He made the bull into a fighter against the decay that the picture represents ... He went still further and emphasised that procreation could not be defeated. That is in the testicles of the bull ... [Thus] In opposition to the decay of society, he places sexuality (procreation), militancy, and high civilisation; but he cannot join them. They remain separate in the bull, on the one hand; and the extending arm holding the lamp on the other. It is this with which Pollock lived.<sup>49</sup>

So, at this point of suspension in his narrative, James introduced the post-1947 'all-over' paintings of Pollock. In relation to artworks, James again took up the issue of affirmation and negation interwoven in a compelling way within the same image. Before quoting from James's quite resourceful and

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47 James 1977, p. 232.

48 James 1992, p. 407.

49 James 1992, pp. 408–9.

incisive analysis of Pollock's 'great paintings of the period 1947', we should recall four key intertextual concepts from his earlier discussions of art that underlie this essay, thus giving it added analytical clout. In summarising the salient attributes of important art, James had written that it involves four common features, two of which help explain the work's 'significant form': namely, a sense of 'tactile values' derived from the material texture of the medium's use and a singular sense of 'movement', such as was invoked by the 'bounding line' of Michelangelo's images. In addition, there are two other concomitant attributes: 'an economy of means' to expand the 'flexibility of the medium' plus its communicative resources and a discursive extension of language through the 'elemental categories of life and labour' that in turn 'adds to the sum knowledge of the world'.<sup>50</sup>

What innovation by Pollock was so notably registered, in James's view, by the 'great paintings of the 1947 period'? Here we should also note that two of the works in this cluster of ground-breaking paintings were given literary titles with crucial links to James's own literary criticism: *Full Fathom Five* (1947) in MoMA, named after a famous passage in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and *Blue* (*Moby Dick*) (c. 1943) in Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki in Japan, entitled after the celebrated book by Herman Melville that was the subject of a lengthy study by James himself in the 1950s. Refusing to see the works as merely abstract or just figurative, or as non-representational, James wrote of the paintings as oblique intimations of barely emergent things. About these evocative, but not illustrative, paintings, James maintained that, in them, there 'is a combination of the immense diversity of the world and scattered all over it are the beginnings and development of the human personality in the human face'.<sup>51</sup> As such, for Pollock, 'The world is not a chaos. He goes on, the diversity becomes more and more structured and organised, not according to previous organisation, but independently according to the designs which have emerged or are implied in the drippings'.<sup>52</sup>

In pursuing this line of enquiry James wrote of how the suggestive emergence of faces in the 1947 works gave way to the 'clearly discernible walking feet' in the 'classic' 1950 paintings – such as *One* in MoMA and *Autumn Rhythm* in the Met. James observed that in these two magisterial mural-size all-over images:

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<sup>50</sup> James 1977, p. 184.

<sup>51</sup> James 1992, p. 409.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

[T]here is the intricacy of design, the emergence of human faces and there is unmistakably the sense of feet walking along. I must say that I am astonished in the critiques I have read, there is insistence on the absence of representation and no statement whatsoever on these walking feet that are so fundamental a part of the structure of the paintings ... In all great artists, as Max Raphael has said, there is an excess ... the *Head* of 1938 cannot be eliminated from *Ocean Greyness* in 1953.<sup>53</sup>

At this point in the essay, James said that the aim of Pollock was nothing less than 'to tackle in his own way the problems that Picasso was tackling in 1937 or 1938' – when the Spanish painter could not decide about the course of history and of human nature, thus leaving them in a state of abeyance in *Guernica*. For James, though, Pollock was able both to advance beyond the technical impasse created by Picasso's consolidation of his discursive field and also to move past the doubts about humanity plaguing Picasso's work. Such was James's conclusion about the new discursive field in painting inaugurated by Pollock:

What conclusions can be drawn from all this? Dangerous as such conclusions really are, I shall not run away from mine. In the bull of *Guernica*, Picasso having already established the civilisation represented by Greece, could find only procreation and struggle as the future of human society. A Great painter [Pollock] starting there found his way to the infinite diversity and basic, though hitherto unrepresented order in the world. But he insisted that from this structural diversity emerged the human face (not high civilisation, as in *Guernica*); and more than mere sexuality and struggle. He found the beginning of humanity in that men, or rather human beings, walked.<sup>54</sup>

We can conclude here commenting on some of the remarkable observations that have come to the fore in James's unlikely look at the modernist paintings of Pollock. First, James has underscored how through a process of doubling-back, Pollock both advanced the medium of painting and returned to one of the definitive moments in the evolution of humanity, namely, when it first walked upright. Second, James has rightly underscored the indexical nature of the sign in Pollock's artworks, rather than their iconic or symbolic characters, so that

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53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

we see Pollock's paintings as a field of indexical signs calling attention to the unique form of human pictorial movement that both attests to the concrete form of artistic labour used for the painting and also engulfs the spectator with a sense of pictorial movement indicative of its significant form. Third, James highlighted the bodily engagement of these all-over images – in truth, these works are not 'gestural paintings' but 'body paintings' – so that they are seen as performative in a way analogous to the aesthetic activity observed in a cricket match. And, fourth, these paintings possessed a panoramic quality and cinematic structure that, in 'Popular Art and Cultural Tradition', James said was symptomatic of all major 'modern art'.

Indeed the best way to understand what James admired about Pollock's all-over paintings and also how he implicitly defined cosmopolitan modernism, is simply to quote one of his more moving descriptions of art in contemporary society:

Our world of the 20th Century is panoramic. Contemporary society gives a sense, on a scale hitherto unknown, of connections, of cause and effect, of the conditions from which an event arises, of other events occurring simultaneously. His [the artist's] world is one of a constantly increasing multiplicity of relationships between himself, immense mechanical constructions and social organisations of world-wide scope ... Modern content demanded a modern technique, not vice versa ... But no age has been so conscious of the permeation of the historical past in the actual present as our own.<sup>55</sup>

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55 James 1992, pp. 247–8.

## Present Indicative Politics and Future Perfect Positions: Barack Obama and *Third Text*

The present is not what it used to be,  
because the future is not what it used to be.

PAUL VALÉRY (1920)

...

Of course, it is possible to overstate the significance of this moment ... The culture war is not over [in the US], but conservatives must face the fact that over the long term they cannot win, The last few decisive weeks of the election really did pit two opposing economic ideologies against each other: the Reaganite catechism of cuts to social programs, tax cuts for the wealthy and deregulation against a center left vision of social investment, access to health care, re-regulation and the dreaded word, redistribution [of wealth].<sup>1</sup>

KATRINA VANDEN HEUVEL, *The Nation* (2008)

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The historic shift signalled by Barack Obama's electoral victory and his unfolding policies corresponds in certain respects, though not all, to how *Third Text* might have envisioned the future three decades ago. Just as on 18 April 2009 Obama happily accepted as a gift from Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez a copy of Eduardo Galeano's anti-colonial classic *Las venas abiertas de América Latina* (1971) so Chávez himself was given in return a copy of Obama's book *The Audacity of Hope* – along with an unusually open-minded promise from a sitting US President that 'I have a lot to learn and I very much look forward to listening and figuring out how we can work together [as equal nations]'.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Editorial, 'Ready, Set, Obama', *The Nation*, 24 November 2008, p. 3.

2 Smith 2009, p. A3.

It was of special symbolic importance that these events involving Obama and Chavez took place on the island of Trinidad, where the legendary intellectual C.L.R. James was a leader in the mid-twentieth-century fight for national liberation from the British Empire, and also that they occurred in the same archipelago of islands that encompasses those connected to the paradigmatic figures of Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon. All of this, and the concomitant talks on Trinidad about ending the Cold War relationship still extant between Cuba and the USA, placed this chapter of the Obama administration firmly within the orbit of *Third Text's* own constellation of cultural and artistic concerns.

Of course, striking symbolic gestures in addition to much anticipated diplomatic language do not automatically translate into the concrete social and economic policies that will allow the term 'post-colonial' to go from being an aspiration of intellectuals to being a daily actuality for the world's majority. Still, policies of the Obama presidency already in place that support human rights, as well as civil liberties, and the renewal of prospects for peace in the Middle East have begun to buoy the hopes of humanity to an extent that would have seemed unimaginable only a short while ago. As we learned recently from investigations of journalist Seymour Hersh, for example, when Barack Obama was elected last November he placed a direct call to the Government of Israel and said quite emphatically *that the Israeli military had better not be in Gaza when he was inaugurated on 20 January 2009* – and they were not. (There is still the issue of possible war crimes committed during the invasion.)<sup>3</sup> In a sense, then, we now live in a period when much more is indeed possible, because we have stopped believing that so much is impossible.

How have developments in the visual arts embodied this shifting landscape and to what degree do these developments constitute openings for future achievements in a way worthy of *Third Text's* often 'utopian' vision of the future?

An instructive aspect of the 2008 presidential elections was how a visual image became iconic of the whole period. The now famous poster of Barack Obama, *Hope* by Shepard Fairey, clearly owes a debt to famous Cuban posters of Che Guevara by artists like Alfredo Rostgaard and Elena Serrano, among many others. (This fact was not noted in the US press at the time.) Making

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3 'Interview with Seymour Hersh', Amy Goodman, 7 April 2009, Democracy Now, National Public Radio, USA. Hersh also noted that Vice President Dick Cheney was in Tel Aviv helping to direct the Gaza invasion and that he was outraged by Obama's directive – so much so that Cheney's outspoken personal and racial denunciations of Obama alarmed the Israeli government, who feared that the reporting of Cheney's actions in the USA might further damage relations between the US and Israel.

this situation all the more intriguing are several incidents highlighting the image and involving the artist, which linked the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC to street graffiti in working-class barrios all around the US, as well as to mass-media publications like *Time* and *Rolling Stone*. Moreover, a couple of legal battles have since embroiled the artwork and artist in bogus cases involving 'plagiarism' on the one hand and 'vandalism' on the other. Thus, the location of this iconic image (over a half million were made) on the margins of 'respectable society' has been maintained, even as its embrace by mainstream society is unchanged.<sup>4</sup>

The fame of the Shepard Fairey poster – which originated as a mixed-media stencilled collage in acrylic but has been widely circulated as a glossy offset poster – is easy to understand even at first glance. The image is based on a brilliant, almost seamless, synthesis of several different visual idioms but as yet is not obviously identified exclusively with any one of them. Taken from a pedestrian Associated Press (AP) wire service photograph in 2006 by a journalist named Mannie Garcia, who shows Obama in front of an American flag, the image by Shepard Fairey is far more visionary, much more nuanced. In addition, the poster features a canny figure/ground relationship and a brash colour interaction, not an anecdotal backdrop like the flag. It is from that deft transformation of the photo that the poster garners much of its ideological resonance.

Even a cursory look at the Fairey image shows that he has used broad colour plans in a manner that recalls the Cubist paintings of Robert Delaunay in the teens of the twentieth century and a type of sans-serif typography invented by the Bauhaus around 1920. The use of 'abstract' non-graduated colour to flatten the ground notably heightens the focus and sharpens the tone, in contrast to the vague ground of the bland news photo that AP erroneously claims Shepard 'plagiarised'. The banality of the AP image is replaced in the poster by a portrait that literally soars, for Fairey has entirely resituated the locus of Obama's head within the original field. In the photo, Obama's portrait occupies the bottom three-quarters of the space, while in the poster his head commands the upper three-quarters of the pictorial space. As such, the print by Fairey is as uplifting as the AP photo is earthbound. A superb touch, indebted to the Conceptual Art of the 1960s, is Fairey's use of the lower portion of the poster left vacant by the reconfiguration of the original layout. In this new lower zone of

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4 See Randy Kennedy, 'Artist Sues the A.P. Over Obama Image', *New York Times*, C1, 10 February, 2009, p. 7; and Lindsay 2009, p. A7. For more, see also Naomi Cohen, 'Viewing Journalism as a Work of Art', *New York Times*, 24 March 2009, p. C2.

the poster, which does not exist in the original photo, Fairey has written in a bold Bauhaus font: 'HOPE'.

Similarly, through his use of stark red highlights on the left side of Obama's face (which is to say the right one for the viewer), Fairey has significantly intensified Obama's upward gaze. Acting as a foil for this colour plane is the greyish-blue background that flows onto the right side of Obama's face, making his image arrestingly multi-toned. In turn, there is a fine use of hatching over this section that enlivens the portrait in a way that flat, un-inflected colour would not have achieved. In short, Shepard Fairey has taken an ordinary photo and creatively transformed it into one of the most famous images produced in the USA over the last several decades. In part this was possible because, just as in the Che photo by Alberto Korda that was used by so many poster artists in Cuba, Obama's gaze in the photo is 'ascensional' – as Roland Barthes put it. In his famous discussion of the ideological taxonomy of positions found in electoral campaign photos, Barthes expounds on the differences between the standard full-face photos of right-wing political candidates and the conventional ascensional orientation of left-wing candidates.<sup>5</sup>

A direct result of Shepard's new-found fame from his Obama poster was that in early 2009 the original collage was exhibited, despite the *déclassé* nature of the medium, near the most celebrated painting of a national figure in US history, namely Gilbert Stuart's eighteenth-century oil portrait of George Washington in the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC. But the trajectory travelled by Fairey's poster image of Obama was exactly the reverse of that of Stuart's oil painting. Fairey's image was first put up on the walls of inner-city streets before graduating to a national museum, while the portrait of Washington gained fame in a national museum before finding its way through points to the one-dollar bill in the USA, and so onto the streets in the most literal sense. Yet another contradiction soon overtook Shepard Fairey. Owing to his meteoric celebrity in 2008, Fairey was astutely offered a large retrospective by the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston for 18 March to 16 August 2009. Yet, as he approached the ICA to attend the reception on the opening night of his show, 'Supply and Demand', Fairey was arrested for 'vandalism' by the Boston police. The AP wire service gave the following account:

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5 Barthes 1957, pp. 160–3. Barthes identifies the ascensional view more with three-quarter views than frontal ones, but Obama's ascensional gaze is linked, as it was in the Che image, with a full-facial view on a twisted torso that has the figure looking over the spectator's head – not directly at us, as in photos of 'tough' right-wing candidates.



Two warrants were issued for Fairey after the police determined that he had tagged property in two locations with graffiti ... The museum said that Fairey was released a few hours after his arrest ... Fairey has been arrested numerous times for drawing on buildings and other private property without permission.<sup>6</sup>

Another artist who produced *engagé* visual images leading up to and through the 2008 election is Theodore A. Harris, who is unquestionably the 'John Heartfield of the US'. A searing series of collages and photomontages by him was brought together for his exemplary book *Our Flesh of Flames*, which also features textual commentary by the well-known poet and playwright Amiri Baraka.<sup>7</sup> In Harris's images, which couple glimpses of self-destruction and militarism by the nation-state with others of the tragic repression of the domestic population, especially the working-class Afro-American community, he uses, abuses and inverts stock national symbols, such as the US Capitol building that appears upside down in several of his collages. In one of them, *Led Away to Decay*, he responds to the dreadful and revealing fact that the United States of America has *the largest population of prisoners in the world*, both in absolute and in per capita terms. The collage by Harris is made from photographic fragments of prison architecture, which are composed so as to construct a cramped, visually confining pictorial space in which an inmate is shown eating a flag, as the final consequence of a flag-waving system that prizes weapons over food both here and abroad. (Heartfield produced a photomontage of German citizens in the 1930s eating guns, rather than butter, in keeping with fascist rhetoric.)

Two other collages, *We Wear Our Flesh Like Flames* and *Vetoed Dreams*, look equally provocatively at the waste of lives and the deferral of dreams. As is often true of his most compelling images, there is an economy that distils the work into an immediately legible composition while nevertheless forcing us to grapple with the complexity of forces that he is confronting. Amiri Baraka summed up as follows the logic of his collages that dealt with the illogical system in which we live:

Teddy Harris' work is the modernism of everyday perception and rationale. He makes works from vouchsafes and unrealized dreams, lies and advertisements for the nowheres. That is, he takes scrapes of America

6 Lindsay 2009, p. A7.

7 Harris and Baraka 2008.

North and threads them through his truthoscopic sensibility ... He tells about the peoples' struggles world wide, against oppression and exploitation. Our lives under racism and the twisted rule of capital ... Mao says, 'All art is propaganda, but not all propaganda is art!' Harris' work speaks to us truthfully, forcefully, and with great skill.<sup>8</sup>

T.W. Adorno remarked in the 1940s that art is about harnessing rage. That is what Harris has done in the early twenty-first century, for example in one of his most recent exhibitions, 'War Is a Map of Wounds', which featured such powerful collages as a triptych called *Postcard from Conquest* and a another mixed-media piece entitled *War is the Sound of Money Eating*.<sup>9</sup>

What do these images tell us about the future, especially as readers of *Third Text* might envision it? Perhaps most obviously these images will, I hope, one day tell us about a chapter in the past now over, when things like war, ethnic hierarchies, corporate capitalism and gender inequities once existed. When that day comes – and it seems to me that a key reason that *Third Text* exists is precisely to help bring it about – there will no longer be a need to vandalise 'private property' and fewer reasons still to create art based on rage. That does not mean that all problems will have ceased to exist, but that those we confront will no longer be the toxic consequence of any class-based society or afterlife of colonialism. As Herbert Marcuse put it:

Art is inexorably infested with guilt. Yet this does not release art from the necessity of recalling again and again that which can survive even Auschwitz and perhaps one day make it impossible.<sup>10</sup>

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8 Baraka 2008, p. 4.

9 'War Is a Map of Wounds: The Art of Howardena Pindell and Theodore A. Harris', Visual Arts Gallery, New Jersey City University, 5 February–5 March 2009.

10 Marcuse 1978, p. 55.

**PART 4**

***Latin America***





## Formative Art and Social Transformation: The Nicaraguan Revolution on Its Tenth Anniversary (1979–1989)

La cultura tiene que ser para superar la división del trabajo, entre trabajo intelectual y trabajo manual ... la cultura tiene que ser democrática ... para que nuestro pueblo no solamente sea consumidor de cultura, lo cual ya es muy importante, pero también productor de cultura.<sup>1</sup>

Father ERNESTO CARDENAL, Minister of Culture, Nicaragua



The year 1989 not only marks the two hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution, but also the tenth anniversary of the Nicaraguan Revolution. This fact has not gone unnoticed in Nicaragua, where the revolutionary legacy of the events in 1789 along with the ideals of the Enlightenment have been duly noted by the Sandinistas themselves, as a significant historical precedent for Nicaragua's own process on behalf of a more progressive society culturally and educationally, as well as one that is more characterised by economic equality, majority participation, and social justice than has ever before been true of Central America. To acknowledge their connection with the French Revolution and the European Enlightenment, the Nicaraguans have placed a replica of Houdon's bust of Voltaire next to a portrait bust of Carlos Fonseca (the Sandinista leader and Marxist theoretician who was martyred by Somoza's National Guard in 1976), both of which flank the main entrance to the exhibition spaces at the National School of Plastic Arts in Managua.

Furthermore, just as the French Revolution witnessed a new emergence in world history of the Third Estate (*tiers état*), so the Nicaraguan Revolution has not only featured a new ascension to power of the popular classes – especially by urban workers and rural wage labourers – but also the advent of a non-Eurocentric worldview both ideologically and in the arts as a necessary

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<sup>1</sup> Cardenal 1982, p. 179.

accompaniment to the newly post-colonial society being constructed there. Here it should be mentioned that the term 'Third World' arose during the 1960s in the context of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles, as a way of delineating the situation of the third estate throughout the world. This global third estate, which is largely though not entirely located in the Third World, consists of the majority of the people in the world, namely, non-Western workers of colour, whether in the agrarian or urban spheres, who must daily confront the continuing economic as well as cultural hegemony of the West within the present world order.<sup>2</sup>

In recognising their own concerns as a conjuncture of class-based considerations and non-Western cultural practices, the Sandinistas have rightly noted their own place in history as one that both relates to yet also substantially advances beyond that of the French Revolution. Thus, Ernesto Cardenal, the famous poet and Minister of Culture in Nicaragua could declare: 'Like the French Revolution, which was not only of French but also of worldwide import, the Nicaraguan Revolution is not only of Nicaraguan but also of Latin American and worldwide importance'.<sup>3</sup>

One of the major achievements of the Nicaraguan Revolution to date has occurred in the arts. (This accomplishment is of course alongside its huge land reform; its literacy crusade of 1980 that saw over half a million people in a country of only three million learn to read, thus elevating literacy from only 53 percent to 88 percent; and its medical campaign that has been singled out for awards by the World Health Organisation.) Few other revolutions in history have given culture such a formative role in social transformation – a fact that has caused the Nicaraguan process to be named a 'revolution of poets'. The most noteworthy reason for this designation has been stated by Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano. According to Galeano, the Nicaraguan Revolution is of signal significance in the arts because of the degree to which it has attempted to *socialise the means of artistic production in the country as a whole*.<sup>4</sup>

This far-reaching effort at socialising the means of artistic production, which will be the primary focus of what follows, has entailed major institutional as well as ideological changes since 1979 and has been concomitant with radical changes in the realm of political economy, particularly those that relate to the implementation of *autogestion* in the workplace, and to the new centrality in

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2 N.A. 1986, pp. 7–9.

3 Cardenal 1982, p. 181 (translation by David Craven).

4 Galeano 1986, p. 102. On the literacy crusade and health campaign, see Cardenal and Miller 1981, pp. 1–26; and Garfield and Taboada 1986, pp. 425–32.

public life of mass organisations.<sup>5</sup> In order to address the process of cultural transformation, involving the way art is produced, by whom it is produced, for whom it is produced, and how it acquires signification in an expanded and politically-charged public sphere, we must analyse three areas of Nicaraguan society.

First, we need to discuss the democratisation of artistic production through the creation of new state institutions, such as the Ministry of Culture, with its national network of *Centros Populares de Cultura* (Popular Centres of Culture) and its nationwide system of *Talleres de Poesía* (Poetry Workshops). All of these institutions have been established expressly to encourage the entire citizenry of Nicaragua to become involved in making art and to participate in the public discourse about the meaning of art.

Second, we will have to discuss the new forms of public patronage and cooperative presentation of art that have come into being with the rise to national prominence of the union of professional artists, that is, the Sandinista Union of Cultural Workers (A.S.T.C.), which plays a decisive role in the exhibition of artwork through union-run galleries and in advising the Nicaraguan government, such as the Ministry of the Interior or the Ministry of Culture, on the acquisition of paintings or the commissioning of public murals, as well as on the type of instruction offered in state art schools.

Third, we will analyse briefly the ongoing efforts to construct a new visual language as part of the revolutionary project to nationalise Nicaragua's cultural resources in keeping with both the movement towards national self-determination and a commitment to internationalism. This necessarily heterogeneous process has resulted in a non-Eurocentric synthesis of Native American artforms with Western avant-garde art, so that Nicaraguan painters, whether *campesino* amateurs or professional artists, present the viewer with a multi-signifying visual language that draws on the compositional syntax of Cubism or Surrealism. Thus, the Nicaraguan Revolution has begun constructing a framework for *socialist pluralism* in the arts in contradistinction to any narrow endorsement of the doctrine of 'Socialist Realism' – a doctrine that is hierarchical in character and ethnocentric in nature.<sup>6</sup>

Established along with the Ministry of Culture in 1979, the national network of *Centros Populares de Cultura* was set-up to provide free training for the populace in drawing, painting, poetry, music, and dance as well as in ceramics,

5 Concerning the workplace democracy in both unions and mass organisations, see Ruchwarger 1987.

6 For an incisive critique of 'socialist realism', see Vázquez 1965.

stone-carving, weaving and other artisanal traditions in a few select centres. In addition, these CPCs, which are normally located in large centrally-located houses confiscated from former Somocistas who have left the country, were charged with the provision of a community library, reading rooms, workshops for the arts, and public theatres. Originally there were 24 centres, with a least one being located in each of the 16 departments in Nicaragua. Now the number has climbed to 28 centres, with more than one being situated in the concentrated urban areas (Managua has four, León has two, for example).<sup>7</sup> At present, there are few if any people in Nicaragua who have not attended a cultural activity organised by one of these local centres, be it an art exhibit, the unveiling of a mural, a poetry reading, a concert of indigenous music or the performance of a play dealing with popular culture, such as the often staged *El baile de Güegüense*. Already by 1983, the CPCs had presented over 6,733 cultural activities, including 110 art festivals, while backing 43 publications (under the Somoza dictatorship, Nicaragua published a maximum of six or seven books a year and now it publishes around 70 books a year).<sup>8</sup> Aside from making the arts more visible, the centres have also made the production of art much more publicly accessible. As a consequence of the poetry workshops, which at their height in 1982 numbered 66 nationally, over 2,000 people from the popular classes have studied and learned to write poetry, a sizable portion of which has been published by the Ministry of Culture either in journals like *Poesía Libre* or in special anthologies.<sup>9</sup> As one North American commentator has observed, these poetry workshops constitute, in per capita terms, the largest grassroots writing programme in history.<sup>10</sup> A comparable consequence of this system has been the emergence of a national school of *campesino* painters numbering in the hundreds. Working in a 'primitivist' manner that draws on pre-Columbian fibre arts traditions – as in their imbricated construction of compositions and in their all-over spatial formats – these *campesino* painters also use references to European art. (Proportionally speaking, this school of painting is larger than was the W.P.A. programme in the U.S. during the 1930s and this school of painting is not restricted to professional artists but instead opens up artistic production to the public as a whole.) Further extending this process of cultural democracy is the

7 This material on the centres comes from two sources: 'Los Centros Populares de Cultura', in *Hacia una Política Cultural* (Managua: Ministry of Culture, 1982), pp. 283–85; and an interview with Emilia Torres, National Director of the Centros, by David Craven and John Ryder, Managua, 10 July 1986.

8 Unger 1988, p. 25.

9 Hollis 1989, p. 1. See also White 1986, pp. 106–13.

10 Johnson 1985, p. 8.



fact that these primitivist paintings are frequently encountered by the general populace in a variety of ways: through community art shows, through newspaper reproductions, on the cover of publications by the Ministry of Culture, and perhaps most prominently through public murals in the primitivist style by such artists as Manuel García. This mass-based acquaintance with and material production of painting is precisely what Ernesto Cardenal had in mind when he spoke of how revolutionary art production entails the historical supersession of the existing division of labour that separates intellectual engagement from manual labour.<sup>11</sup>

With the victory over the Somozas in 1979, which saw the popular destruction of public sculpture in honour of the dictatorship, most of the private art galleries in Nicaragua closed and their owners immigrated to Miami.<sup>12</sup> It was in this void that public galleries were founded by the Sandinista Union of Cultural Workers (A.S.T.C.), such as Las Ruinas and the Fernando Gordillo Gallery, and under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, such as the Xavier Kantón Gallery at the National School of Plastic Arts.

Significantly, it is the union of plastic artists that now plans, selects, and runs most of the public art exhibitions in Nicaragua. As such, this process of self-management by the professional artists is linked to the dynamic of workplace democracy that one sees in factories and on farm cooperatives. The degree of autonomy enjoyed by the unionised professional artists – the majority of whom took up arms against the Somoza regime – is made clear by the complete lack of any state-sanctioned official style. Along with this impressive formal diversity in the visual arts, there is (with only one exception) a notable absence of any heroic public depictions of living Sandinista leaders. Just as the Sandinista directorate has emphatically opposed the use of art on behalf of any cult of personality, such as one saw under Stalin or Mao, so President Daniel Ortega has embraced a policy of socialist pluralism, with the position that ‘the revolution cannot impose formulas’ in the arts, since it must be ‘without artistic restrictions of any type’.<sup>13</sup>

The structure and role of the artists’ union (A.S.T.C.) has been explained by poet Rosario Murillo, its general secretary. In an interview, she discussed these issues in the following terms:

11 Cardenal 1982 [1980], p. 179.

12 La Duke 1983, p. 10.

13 Daniel Ortega, ‘La Revolución’, in *Hacia una Política Cultural*, p. 88 (translation by David Craven).

We make up what we call the trade union Organisation of Nicaraguan artists ... Above all, our work consists in helping artists disseminate their work, both here and abroad ... We actively try to solve the artists' material problems with living and working conditions ... [W]e finance ourselves with our resources based on membership fees and international sources. (The Italian government has helped fund some notable mural projects, for instance). To give you an example, the materials we import for the plastic arts are purchased with the 20% donated by each artist when he or she sells a painting. The same money helps us put out publicity and catalogues. Materials are sold to the artists at cost. Our goals are at the same time to professionalise the artistic work and to make this art available to the mass of people. We have 9,000 members, of whom 100 are full-time artists. These are artists who are learning more, teaching others, producing work and building our culture. Nicaragua never before had this climate in which to create art ... [Now] we work in all styles: realism, surrealism, primitivism, and abstraction ... Our goal is to produce the best art regardless of style ... [Thus] we are recognising an explosion of work in the plastic arts, which didn't exist before.<sup>14</sup>

Aside from the numerous public murals commissioned by the Ministry of Culture, from such painters as Manuel García, Alejandro Canales, and Leonel Cerrato, there is a large collection of contemporary painting in the Ministry of the Interior. The person most in charge of advising the Ministry on the acquisition of this work is painter Orlando Sobalvarro, one of the most highly regarded people in the Union of Plastic Artists. Himself the son of a miner, Sobalvarro has helped select work by union members for this state agency and for several other government buildings.

Painter María Gallo is another prominent member of the Union of Plastic Artists. She exhibits regularly at the Fernando Gordillo Gallery, while also working as an art teacher for the *Centros Populares de Cultura* in Managua. As of 1981, she was named general coordinator of the visual arts programme for the entire national network of centres. In this capacity, she travels around the country to assess art programmes, to offer workshops, to organise exhibits, and to promote art 'so that it is accessible for all levels of the population, including housewives, peasants, and factory workers'.<sup>15</sup> Her own heavily impastoed paintings are based on an interimage dialogue both with the indigenous stone-carving

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14 White 1986, pp. 122–5.

15 La Duke 1983, p. 11.

tradition that has been recently revived by artists like Fernando Saravia at the CPC of San Juan de Limay and also with the European avant-garde art of Paul Gauguin, among others. Her 1986 painting of a woman street vender is meant to be an appreciation of Gauguin's efforts at producing non-Euocentric formal values and a critique of how Gauguin depicted non-Western women in *Tahitian Women with Mangoes*.<sup>16</sup> Here as elsewhere, there is a noteworthy effort at embracing the experiences of the popular classes while also continuing to engage critically the sophisticated art from other cultures, particularly from the West.

The new concept of art that covers the various dimensions of art production in Nicaragua that we have examined, has been aptly encapsulated by Ernesto Cardenal:

After the triumph of the Revolution, culture ... has become democratised. The people are no longer simply consumers of culture; the people themselves are now the producers of it. [Yet] we are not seeking a low level of culture for everyone but rather an elevated culture that is really accessible to all ... We seek an integration of popular culture and high culture, of indigenous culture and international culture.<sup>17</sup>

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16 Interview of María Gallo by David Craven, Managua, 16 July 1986.

17 Cardenal and Murillo 1985, p. 43.

## Cuban Art and the Democratisation of Culture

Since the early 1960s, Cuban culture has assumed a unique position internationally. At once distinctively Caribbean, yet also exemplary of developments world-wide, Cuban art has diverged from Eastern bloc traditions, as well as those of the West, to arrive at a seminal position for Third World cultural advances. Indications of this later achievement surfaced during the early 1960s when Che Guevara criticised both the Stalinist doctrine of ‘socialist realism’ *and* the Western fetish for isolated ‘personal expression’.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, it was in this same period that Fidel Castro opposed the institution of any official style that would set narrow formal limits to the conception of art. While Khrushchev, in the early 1960s, condemned all modern art as counter-revolutionary, Fidel significantly disagreed, with the observation: ‘Our enemies are capitalists and imperialists, not abstract art’.<sup>2</sup> As a corollary to this position, Fidel enunciated the basic axiom of Cuban cultural developments since 1959: ‘Within the Revolution, everything. Against the Revolution, nothing’.<sup>3</sup>

From the beginning, then, the cultural progress of the Cuban Revolution has been characterised by an unprecedented breadth in several respects. Perhaps the most profound manifestation of this advance has been a sustained commitment to what the Cubans call ‘cultural democracy’, an expansive process whereby the populace has assumed a far more participatory role in the cultural life of the country than normally prevails elsewhere in the world. As such, the Cuban Revolution has not only greatly expanded the audience for the arts, it has also substantially increased the number of those engaged in the arts. In addition, this newly enlarged public sphere and aesthetic context has led to an artistic vocabulary of remarkable formal, as well as conceptual, scope. Components of it range from pre-colonial African traditions and US pop culture to pre-Columbian forms and European high culture. At its most profound, the art production of Cuba has gone beyond mere eclecticism to a new synthesis both internationalist in general orientation, yet specifically expressive of major issues confronting the Third World. This impressive accomplishment, along with an extension of cultural democracy, explains why ‘Cuba has been at

1 Guevara 1977, pp. 264–7.

2 Cockcroft 1983, pp. 3–4. For a further look at Khrushchev’s opposition to modernity in the visual arts, see Berger 1969.

3 Castro 1961, p. 15.

the center of cultural activity in the Hispanic world for the past 20 years'.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, these factors also make clear why Cuban art and culture will in all probability continue to occupy a prominent position for countries around the world, which are now confronting the phenomenon of cultural underdevelopment that is interrelated to economic dependency.<sup>5</sup>

In order to address the important cultural dynamic of Cuba since the revolution, several things will be necessary: 1) We must first discuss the concrete cultural policies instituted after 1958, as well as the theoretical basis for them. Such a discussion will entail a consideration of cultural democracy and the transformed public sphere it presupposes, in order to determine whether the arts have indeed become much more accessible to the Cuban populace as part of an emphatic decentralisation of political power since the revolution, particularly since the mid-1970s. Concomitant with this consideration will be an assessment of the Cuban concept of 'popular culture' – a concept to be sharply distinguished from populism and mass culture. 2) We will also examine a few of the many notable artistic achievements engendered by this new cultural matrix – Nueva Trova music, the National Ballet under Alicia Alonso, the New Theater of Escambray and Cabildo Teatral, the criticism of Roberto Fernández Retamar and Roberto Segre, the highly regarded graphic design of posters for OSPAAAL and the Film Institute, the paintings of René Portocarrero and Raul Martínez, and, of course, the celebrated films of directors like Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, Pastor Vega, Santiago Alvarez, Marisol Trujillo and several others. 3) Finally, having discussed the cultural successes since 1959, we will then consider significant problems within the realm of art and culture that have yet to be resolved.

### Cultural Policies since 1959

Recently, Armando Hart Dávalos, the Minister of Culture in Cuba, stated: 'What we hope to achieve in the future ... is for art to penetrate all spheres of life'.<sup>6</sup> Whether or not this goal will be attained is, of course, still open to question, but other achievements related to it are certainly no longer in doubt. Prominent among these accomplishments is the immense progress already registered towards incorporating diverse cultural activities into the everyday experience

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4 González Echevarría, 1985, p. 155.

5 See, for example, Castro 1983.

6 Hart Dávalos 1983, pp. 12–13.

of the Cuban public. During the first decade of the revolution, the centralisation of political power and the rationalisation of the economy were accomplished by the institution of numerous cultural agencies on the national level. One of the first cultural acts of the revolutionary government, in March of 1959, was the founding of the National Film Institute (ICAIC). This followed the consensus at the 1st National Congress on Education and Culture in Cuba that cinema is 'the art *par excellence* in our century'.<sup>7</sup>

Several other state institutions of considerable importance were also established in 1959: the National Ballet, the National Folkloric Ensemble, the National Chorus, and *Casa de las Americas*, the International Center for Latin American Art and Literature, whose journal and prestigious literary awards occupy a fundamental role in the intellectual life of the Spanish-speaking world. Indeed, *Casa de las Americas*, along with Cuban Cinema and the National Ballet, has played a major part in fostering a 'pan-Hispanic identity' for artists throughout Latin America.<sup>8</sup> The early 1960s were hardly less noteworthy for the foundation of new agencies along these lines. First came the creation of the National Symphony Orchestra, and five provincial concert orchestras, then *Cinemateca de Cuba*, which today contains the largest collection of Latin American films in the world. Also occurring in 1960 was the establishment of the *Consejo Nacional de Cuba* (National Consul of Culture), which was to be replaced in 1976, during the decentralisation process, by the present Ministry of Culture, a more wide-ranging and flexible agency responsible for co-ordinating events among the various provincial centres of culture.

It was by means of its National Literacy Crusade in 1961, however, that Cuba's cultural transformation was advanced most substantially. Considered by UNESCO and other international educational organisations to be one of the most significant events in the modern history of education, this *Alfabetización* elevated Cuba's rate of literacy from 72 percent to 98 percent, the highest in Latin America and one of the finest in the world.<sup>9</sup> A consequence of the advance was an end to what Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* labelled the 'culture of silence' – that state of cultural disempowerment linked to economic impoverishment and political disenfranchisement which afflicts the

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7 Cited in Burton 1985, p. 135.

8 González Echevarría 1985a, p. 155. Jose Martí was an early advocate of this identity. See Martí 1977.

9 Confirmation of this literacy level can be found in such sources as the Quality of Life Index of the Overseas Development Council, among other agencies. Also see Bowles 1971, pp. 472–500.

majority of people in the Third World.<sup>10</sup> A revealing monument to the cultural rejuvenation made possible by the literacy campaign is the case of José Yañes. Now one of the leading poets in Cuba, Yañes was an illiterate worker in a sausage factory prior to the literacy crusade. Along with this quantitative expansion in readership has come a qualitative extension in terms of what is read. The Cuban public is now much more sophisticated, as evidenced by the fact that the most popular authors there are also among the finest writers in recent Latin American literature: Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, Ernesto Cardenal, and, of course, José Martí, Nicolás Guillén, and Alejo Carpentier. Among non-Hispanic authors, Proust, Kafka, Sartre, Robbe-Grillet, Genet, Faulkner, and especially Hemingway (who was always a strong supporter of the Cuban Revolution as well as a friend of Fidel) are widely known and read.<sup>11</sup> In a book about the time he spent in Cuba during the 1960s, Ernesto Cardenal describes his pleasurable surprise at the rapidity with which entire editions of literary works sell out in this country. He witnessed, for example, a 10,000 edition of his own poetry go out of stock in a week, a 50,000 edition of writings by Mario Benedetti of Uruguay sell out in a comparable period, and a 90,000-copy edition of *Cien años de Soledad* (100 Years of Solitude) by García Márquez disappear in a few weeks.<sup>12</sup> In fact, several million copies of this latter book have now been sold in Cuba, which has a total population of only around 10 million. Gabriel García Márquez has personally experienced the extent of the esteem his work enjoys there. On one occasion several years ago, the Colombian writer visited Cuba in order to observe changes in some of the most rural areas of the country. When García Márquez was introduced to *campesinos* on a farm cooperative, however, they quickly asked if he was really the author of *100 Years of Solitude*, a book they had all read and deeply admired. Thus, instead of asking questions about the farm cooperative, García Márquez ended up answering questions about his own novel.

The mid-1960s saw a continuation of these early developments, with 1962 being the year that several more institutions were set up: the National Recording Institute for Music, the National School of the Arts (Cubanacán), the National Institute for Radio and Television, and the National Commission on Museums and Monuments, whose task is the conservation, restoration, and classification of the country's architecture. Since the early 1970s, a number of more specialised national centres, designed to advance scholarship in various

10 Friere 1972.

11 Lockwood 1969. Also see: Castro 1984, pp. 81–7; and Capellan 1985, p. 14.

12 Cardenal 1972, p. 76.

art forms, have been founded: the Alejo Carpentier Centre for Cultural Promotion, the Juan Marinello Cultural Centre, *Casa del Caribe* (for the advanced study of Caribbean art), the Centre for Musical Studies, the Wifredo Lam Centre for Plastic Arts, and the Centre for Jose Martí Studies. In addition, and perhaps more conspicuously, the Cuban government has sponsored a lengthy list of both international and national art festivals. Among these, the International Festival of Ballet (begun in 1961) is one of the oldest and most successful, while the International Film Festival and recently established Latin American Biennial in the Visual Arts (begun in 1984) are among the newest and most promising. The list of national festivals is a longer one, with celebrations being devoted to the Rumba, the Son (a type of peasant music), Salsa, and numerous other popular art forms.

Even a quick survey of the concrete results generated by these institutional changes is impressive. In 1958, for example, there were only six museums and not even a hundred libraries in the entire country. Today, there are over two hundred and thirty museums and nearly two thousand libraries. While before the revolution, very few people had ever visited a museum, today, the museum attendance averages over one million a year (or 10 percent of the population).<sup>13</sup> In 1958, almost a third of the Cubans were illiterate; today, *all* are literate and one of every three is a student in some capacity. Prior to 1959, there were three university centres; now there are 40, with a college population 12 times larger than before the revolution. Of this number, 46 percent are women, one of the highest rates in the world.<sup>14</sup> In 1959, Cuba published less than one million books a year; today, it publishes over 50 million books a year, all of which are sold below production costs, with school textbooks being free to students (incidentally, the first book published in an extremely large edition was *Don Quixote*, which is probably still one of the most widely read books in Cuba). In 1962, the National Consul on Culture sponsored events attended by four million spectators, or half the population. During 1975, the Ministry of Culture sponsored events in the arts attended by 67 million spectators, or almost seven times the national population.<sup>15</sup>

In 1958, there was no national film industry, although Cuba had one of the largest per capita audiences in the world, at one-and-a-half million cinema-goers per week from a population of less than 7 million at the time.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, B-grade movies from Hollywood constituted over fifty percent of the

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13 Weiss 1985, pp. 119–20.

14 Leiner 1985, p. 31.

15 Weiss, 1985, p. 121.

16 Burton 1985, p. 136.



films shown, a situation which is still endemic to many Latin American countries. Now Cuba has a highly esteemed film institute that regularly wins awards in international competitions, and one which produces an annual average of forty documentaries, four to six feature films, five to ten animated films, and fifty-two weeklies. Nonetheless, Cuban films still make up only 5 percent of the 140 or so shown per year in over five hundred and ten theatres, with the vast majority of films coming from Europe and other Third World countries. According to the terms of the American economic embargo, North American cinema companies are prohibited by US laws from sending films there on a regular basis.<sup>17</sup>

Extending, as well as complementing, these other gains has been a structural shift accompanying the transition to *poder local* (local power) that began in the mid-1970s. Foremost in this development has been the establishment of a national network of *Casas de Cultura* (houses of culture). As noted by the Ministry of Culture in a UNESCO publication, the object of the *Casas de Cultura* 'is to bring people into direct contact with art, to disseminate culture, to raise the educational level of the population, and to provide it with opportunities for leisure and recreation'.<sup>18</sup> Now around two hundred nationally, *Casas* exist in each of the 169 municipalities that function as the basic political units within the country. Administered by the municipalities in conjunction with the Ministry of Culture, these *Casas* include a library, a museum, an amphitheater, an auditorium, conference rooms, music halls, and art studios. It is here that young people can study dance, music, and painting free; that local artists and artisans can display their work; that touring exhibitions are shown; that musical or theater performances by both visiting professionals and local amateurs take place.<sup>19</sup> As statistics demonstrate, a direct consequence of these *Casas de Cultura* has been to reinforce the immense increase in amateur groups involved in music, theatre, dance, and the plastic arts. In 1964 there were one thousand such groups. By 1975, when the *Casas* were first set up, that number had risen to eighteen thousand groups, with the number of children participating in the arts exceeding six hundred thousand.<sup>20</sup>

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17 Burton 1985, p. 148; see also Fanshel 1982.

18 Saruski and Mosquera 1979, p. 25.

19 Weiss 1985, pp. 124–5; see also Armas 1977, p. 27.

20 Saruski and Mosquera 1979, p. 25.

### Cultural Democracy and Dialogical Art

All these accomplishments notwithstanding, questions still remain about the *nature* of this new public and just how much it has made the transition from passive consumption to critical engagement. Such questions are all the more pressing because of the situation which currently prevails in Western Europe and the US. As Pierre Bourdieu has demonstrated, cultural consumption in France and indeed the West as a whole continually generates ideological legitimacy for social differences, differences that sustain what he terms the 'aristocracy of culture'.<sup>21</sup> As such, Bourdieu's survey has further delineated the direct connection between one's educational level, class standing, and nature of interest in the arts. In France and Holland, for example, less than one percent of those with only a primary education visit a museum, while over fifteen percent of those with at least a secondary education frequent museums.<sup>22</sup> Even more revealing is the fact that 66 percent of all blue collar workers in these countries associate a museum with a church whose religion remains mysterious, hence off-limits, while most of the managerial sector (54 percent) tends to view the museum as analogous to a library, a lecture hall, or some other site for learning.<sup>23</sup> In other words, there is a further correlation between one's degree of workplace self-management and one's sense of having access to the arts. Thus Bourdieu's survey shows how only the dominant political groups in the West, i.e., the most educated and economically ascendent sectors of the middle class (*bourgeoisie*) – feel entitled to 'the right to speak' on all substantive issues, whether political, economic or cultural.<sup>24</sup>

How then has Cuba – formerly a Western colony deeply characterised by the cultural asymmetry associated with the West – been transformed, so as to enlarge the number of those who feel they have 'the right to speak' about the arts? It is one thing to eradicate the 'culture of silence' and quite another to foster a vigorous public discourse by the majority. In light of Bourdieu's findings concerning the connection between class power and cultural empowerment, it is clear that any look at the formal devices for opening up public participation in the arts must also include a discussion of how this cultural development is, or is not, grounded in a comparable progression in the sphere of political economy. In short, has cultural democracy in Cuba been advanced, as Bourdieu implies it would be, by a marked democratisation of the workplace, as well as

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21 Bourdieu 1984, p. 7.

22 Bourdieu and Darbel 1969, appendix 5, table 4.

23 Bourdieu and Darbel 1969, appendix 4, table 8.

24 Bourdieu, 1984, p. 411.

by a decentralisation of political power on the part of the silenced majority in pre-revolutionary society? Only if the latter two preconditions have been met would it seem plausible to speak of any expanded public sphere for the arts predicated on a principled and rational exchange open to all sectors of society.

The answer to the first part of the above query is one that most visitors who have attended cultural events in Cuba can provide. Concrete avenues for expanding public discourse about the arts are the ever-present, generally lively, often lengthy dialogues that accompany most cultural activities and are considered essential to cultural democracy. These dialogues, which occur along with most cultural events, involve informal discussions unquestionably attended by people from all sectors of society, particularly factory workers, and are led by recognised writers, filmmakers, musicians, or visual artists. Such well-attended public dialogues accompanied, for example, the various showings of *La Habanera* (1984), a controversial new film by Pastor Vega. After one projection of the film, at the Foundation for Cultural Heritage in Havana, there was an especially vigorous debate about the merits of the film, with Pastor Vega himself moderating the discussion. Set in the psychiatric ward of a major Cuban hospital, the film explores the gender relationships within this strata of society. Above all, it focuses on the contradictions of the woman who heads her unit, yet is unable to apply the insights from her profession to her own private life.<sup>25</sup>

The open discussion after the film showing intensely engaged a very heterogeneous audience representing various sectors of Cuban society – from assembly line workers to members of the intelligentsia. Questions were raised about the plausibility of the ending, about the use of photography, about the style of the film, and, above all, about the lifestyle of the main protagonists. One young worker stated that everyone in his factory has seen *La Habanera* and that most of them had difficulty relating to the film because of the material benefits, specifically consumer products, enjoyed by the medical profession.<sup>26</sup> Although factory workers and physicians enjoy the same access to education, health care, and food, doctors do in fact receive larger salaries, hence, access to more consumer goods. Significantly enough, the basis of controversy surrounding *La Habanera*, namely, the continued existence of a material inequality that contradicts the even more egalitarian society still being aspired to through the revolutionary process – has itself been the major theme of a profound, and also widely discussed new film. In *Hasta Cierta Punto*, Tomás Gutierrez Alea

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25 Brody 1984, pp. 9–10.

26 Ibid.

engages in a self-critical focus on how a Cuban film-maker intent on shooting a film about the residual *machismo* among workers, with whom he has several dialogues in the film, is forced to confront his own otherwise unacknowledged sentiments in favour of gender inequality. Not surprisingly, his own *machismo*, the *machismo* of an intellectual, manifests itself in a more oblique way owing to his higher educational level and different lifestyle.

In public dialogues about films like *La Habanera* and *Hasta Cierta Punto*, one encounters the realisation that Cuban people from all sectors are neither reluctant to speak out nor afraid to criticise what they have seen. This is especially true of dialogues about the film medium in a country where almost all people consider themselves film critics. As a North American correspondent recently observed in the *International Herald Tribune*, a visitor definitely leaves these debates with the sense that 'culture is everybody's business' because these dialogues convey a 'feeling that the opinion of the simple man in the street counts. Just as every sector of the population participates in music, or could be seen at the Biennial art exhibition, so people from all strata of society attended the film debate [about *La Habanera*].'<sup>27</sup>

In fact, these dialogues have themselves inspired poetry and become ancillary themes in cinema. A masterful use of this motif occurs in Tomás Gutierrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968), one of the finest films ever produced in Latin America. During a brief part of this densely kaleidoscopic work, there is a public debate about the problem of underdevelopment, its historical origin, etc., which prompts a North American in the audience to remark caustically: 'Can't you people do anything more revolutionary than talk to each other?' His dismissive statement in turn strikes a sympathetic response in the mind of the main protagonist – a handsome, wealthy, and well-educated man still holding firm to old privileges and inequities in the midst of these strange new social phenomena. This protagonist, an ironic embodiment of Hollywood 'perfection', leaves the open dialogue with the clear assumption that this new public discourse is simply an unpleasant symptom of underdevelopment *per se*. As such, Gutierrez Alea incisively focuses on the pervasiveness of these new public dialogues, yet through the eyes of one unsympathetic to them, thus necessitating the critical intervention of the film audience to resolve this debate within the film and in turn to decide the fate of these dialogues outside the film.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> For an excellent discussion of this aspect of the film by Gutierrez Alea himself, see 'An Interview with Tomás Gutierrez Alea', in Georgakas and Rubenstein 1983, pp. 156–60.

A poem by Nelson Herrera Ysla, 'Colloquialism' (1979), celebrates these everyday dialogues as a seminal force for the art form he practises:

Forgive me, defender of images & symbols.

I forgive you, too.

Forgive me, hermetic poets for whom I have boundless admiration, but we have so many things left to say in a way that everyone understands as clearly as possible, the immense majority about to discover the miracle of language

Forgive me, but I keep thinking that Fidel has taught us dialogue and that this, dear poets, has been a decisive literary influence.

Thank you.<sup>29</sup>

These dialogical tendencies in the construction of artistic meaning are reminiscent of Paulo Freire's contention that henceforth advanced culture must be arrived at through a dynamic interchange involving the majority versus the hegemonic concept shared both by conservatives and certain sectors of the avant garde of high culture as a closed set of exclusive values simply transmitted to the majority. Film directors in Cuba have engaged this dialogical process of cultural democracy by means of directorial self-criticism and a critique of medium, thus calling attention both to the open-ended nature of cinematic statements and to the consummative role critically of the public. In this way, the *best* Cuban films (several of which have already been noted) initiate a critical dialogue, rather than presenting an artistic monologue. As Alfredo Guevara, Director of the National Film Institute, has said: a major aim has been 'to demystify cinema for the entire population; to work, in a way, against our own power to dismantle all the mechanisms of cinematic hypnosis'.<sup>30</sup> This process, which Guevara and others call 'cultural decolonisation', features an advanced use of medium self-consciousness to call attention to the social limits and ideological dimensions of a medium often assumed to be conceptually transparent and only technically problematic. Various formal strategies with extra-formal consequences for the viewer's participation in a critical dialogue are used in the most significant Cuban films. These devices have both derived from and substantially extended innovations by Godard, Pasolini and Italian Neo-Realism, the great Russian filmmakers (Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisen-

29 Herrera Ysla 1979 (cited in Lippard 1984, p. 118; also see pp. 230–4 where she discusses her reaction to Cuban Art).

30 Quoted in Rosen 1972, p. 53. See also Alea 1982.

stein) and Brazilian Cinema Novo. Among these formal strategies for triggering interpretive involvement by the audience are: a Brechtian use of temporal dislocation to undermine linear narrativity, a focus on the actual mechanics of filmmaking (hence, also on art production as a form of labour), a montage shifting between documentary footage and fictional passages, and a parodistic use of Hollywood genres like Westerns or war films.<sup>31</sup> Among Cuban films, those of Tomás Gutierrez Alea, Julio García Espinosa, Sergio Giral, and Marisol Trujillo (one of the most impressive new directors) seem to feature these critical techniques most often, while the works of Pastor Vega and Humberto Solas, for example, appear to incorporate them the least. Furthermore, aside from creating films to accommodate the new public participation, Cuban cinema is exemplary in another respect. As Alice Walker, the black North American novelist, has approvingly observed of Cuban films: '[they] are excellent examples of how a richly multiracial, multi-cultural society can be reflected unselfconsciously in popular art'.<sup>32</sup>

Cuban literature, as well as song-lyric writing, features formal elements and conceptual engagement analogous to that in films. While Cuba's greatest contemporary writers, Nicolás Guillén (b. 1902) and Alejo Carpentier (1904–1980) grew to artistic maturity prior to the revolution, they nonetheless did so by means of indigenous Afro-Cuban idioms and European traditions, which have gained widespread influence only since the popular transformation of culture from 1959. It is, above all, fitting that the poet laureate of the revolution, as well as current president of the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC), is Nicolás Guillén, a black man, who has long written poetry synthesising various popular art forms with high culture to great public acclaim. If the revolution has yet to conceive another Guillén or Carpentier, it has nevertheless created a new and dynamic interchange between recognised writers and the Cuban populace. At present, the most notable Cuban novelists, as well as poets, such as Miguel Barnet (*Canción de Rachel*) or Reynaldo González (*La fiesta de los tiburones*) are advancing the synthesis achieved in Guillén and Carpentier by means of a collage approach that both questions the role of the author and presents the activity of reading as a socio-political act, as well as an aesthetic one.<sup>33</sup> An excellent example of some of these traits engaging the public to a greater degree can be found in the song-lyrics of Silvio Rodríguez. One of

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31 Burton 1985, p. 140.

32 Walker 1977, p. 99. Concerning the issue of black filmmakers, see Burton and Crowds 1977.

33 González Echevarría 1985a, p. 170.

the major figures in *Nueva Trova* (New Troubador) folk music – along with Sara González and Pablo Milanés – Silvio Rodríguez uses an acute sense of authorial self-criticism along with deft *double entendres* on historical events in his popular song, ‘Playa Girón’. This title is replete with multiple meanings, since it is the Spanish phrase for what is referred to in English as the ‘Bay of Pigs’ and is also the name of a fishing vessel upon which Rodríguez once worked:

*Compañeros* poets:

taking into account the last events in poetry  
I’d like to ask – it is urgent –  
what kind of adjectives should be used to make  
the poem of a boat without it getting sentimental,  
apart from the vanguard or obvious Propaganda  
if I should use words  
like the Cuban Fishing Flotilla and *Playa Girón*.

*Compañeros* musicians:

taking into account those polytonal and audacious songs  
I’d like to ask – it is urgent –  
what kind of harmony should be used to make  
the song of this boat with men no longer children  
men and only men on deck  
men black and red and blue  
the men who man the *Playa Girón*.

*Compañeros* historians:

taking into account how implacable truth must be  
I’d like to ask – it is so urgent –  
what I should say, what limits I must respect  
if someone steals food and afterward sacrifices his life  
    what must we do  
how far must we practice the truths:  
How far do we know.  
Let them write – then – the story, their story, the men of the *Playa Girón*.<sup>34</sup>

34 Cardenal 1972, p. 75. See also Acosta 1977, pp. 80–3.

New directions in Cuban theater have arisen since the mid-1960s, with the express aim of engaging portions of the public otherwise unattracted to the classical European drama presented in the major urban centres. Two professional groups, one originating in Santiago and the other in Havana, decided to reclaim much older forms of street theatre, called simply *relaciones*, that were based on indigenous Afro-Cuban music, dance, and masks. In 1971, the Santiago group became known as *Cabildo Teatral*, a title adopted from a colonial word meaning both an assembly of civic leaders and the general grouping of black citizens. The new *relaciones*, which draw on stock characters from the Golden Age of Spanish drama, Afro-Cuban myths including traditional music and dance, along with social values from the Cuban present, were first staged in the main plazas of the low-income, black neighborhoods of Santiago. When performing in other demographic areas, such as agrarian ones, *Cabildo Teatral* performs street theatre drawing on folk music and dance like the *décima*, the *guajira*, the *son*, and other forms of *campesino* popular culture.

The second tendency of New Theatre in Cuba is represented by the *Grupo Teatro Escambray*, which began in 1969 when professionals from Havana took *relaciones* to some of the most underdeveloped parts of the island. A number of their works deal with rural folklore and historical events peculiar to the area. Now numbering at least twenty, these groups such as *Cabildo Teatral* and *Teatro Escambray* work in consultation with local mass organisations like worker councils in factories. Their main objective, as well as major success, has been to involve their audiences, normally not audiences which attend the theatre, in the structure of the production itself. In some, public discussions are used as a starting point for the *relaciones*, while in others the performance is designed to end with the audience turned into a public assembly. Folk music typical of the region will be used in the choreography, with performances often terminating in an early Cuban form for festivals, namely the *guateque* ('dance line') formed by spectators and performers weaving around the city streets.<sup>35</sup>

The success of street theatre both in appealing to and involving the working class has been noted by an actress of the Participating Theater Group, which often performs near the loading docks of Havana's maritime port:

[N]o one here ever used to go to the theater. Now, hundreds of workers have been turned on to serious theater as a worthwhile activity. Going to a play has become something they like to do in the evening. First, the

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35 Weiss 1985, pp. 127–80. See also Padrón 1977, pp. 64–72; Pogolotti 1978; and Sejourne 1978.



dockworkers came out of curiosity to see their fellow workers acting. Now, you'll find them at any performance in the city.<sup>36</sup>

But, to return to Bourdieu's aforementioned studies, what are the political and economic foundations for these remarkable gains in cultural democracy? This democratisation of the arts would hardly seem plausible without substantial changes not only in the national level of education, but also in terms of worker self-management, that is, in the democratisation of the workplace. While from the beginning Cuba's political life has been characterised by a leadership of considerable accessibility and 'a continuous informal dialogue that is found in few other countries of the world',<sup>37</sup> there was a disturbing tendency in the early 1960s towards an excessive centralisation of power along with a matching growth of bureaucratisation. This latter development became an issue of national controversy when Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, in his immensely popular film *The Death of a Bureaucrat* (1967), deftly satirised the debilitating consequences of this mushrooming bureaucracy. The former topic, that of the monopoly of decision-making by the managerial sector, became a much-debated issue when in 1970 both Risquet, the Minister of Labor, and Fidel Castro publicly attacked the lack of workplace democracy and the absence of worker self-management.<sup>38</sup>

After this period of national discussion in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Cuban people embarked on a process of pronounced decentralisation and one of marked debureaucratisation. This dynamic, which is spelled out in the new Cuban Constitution of 1976, has led to a shift in political power from the national level to *poder local* (based on the popularly elected assemblies of the municipalities) and to a degree of *autogestion*, or workplace democracy, hardly matched anywhere else in the world. The election of worker representatives to the Management Council, along with quarterly meetings between the council and factory delegates, insure the ongoing managerial involvement of ordinary workers, who also have new authority to dismiss bad management. Already by 1976, 80 percent of all workers felt they were able to make decisions of importance to their production assemblies. In 1980, the national economic plan was discussed in 91 percent of all Cuban factories, with workers' suggestions being used to amend the plan in 59 percent of all enterprises.<sup>39</sup> Cuba's advanced level of worker self-management is even more impressive when one realises that this

36 Quoted in Randall 1981, p. 111.

37 Petras and Morley 1985, p. 431.

38 Zimbalist 1985, pp. 217–18.

39 JUCEPLAN 1980, p. 27. See also Harnecker 1979; and Zimbalist 1975.

country still has a majority of its labour force in the sphere of production (54 percent), with the service sector being 20 percent, the professionals and technicians being 18 percent, and the administrative sector (including party cadres) being only 8 percent.<sup>40</sup>

Significantly for our purposes, the elected trade union committees, labour councils, and other mass organisations are involved with making decisions not only regarding production levels and working conditions, but also about cultural activities both in the factory and in the community at large. In fact, there are few factories without dance troupes, music groups, or some other cultural brigade. One such factory-based dance troupe appears in Pastor Vega's very fine film, *Portrait of Theresa* (1979).

The coterminous achievements of cultural democracy, workplace self-management, and decentralised political power also follow from the dynamic intersection of certain developments in Cuban history. Prior to 1959, two experiences in particular marked the situation of the majority in Cuba: a *deferred national revolution*, which occurred when in 1898 US capital replaced Spanish colonialism as the dominant economic determinant on the island, and a *deferred social revolution*, which happened in 1934 when Cuban workers rose up to establish the first Soviets in the Western Hemisphere, only to have them suppressed in a military coup backed by the US. As such, the Cuban Revolution became the overdetermined historical juncture at which these postponed developments were first able to re-emerge, converge, and finally be realised interdependently. Thus, the last Latin American country to overcome colonialism, Cuba ironically became the first Latin nation to resist Western imperialism.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, the means whereby this advance was possible rested most considerably on a mobilised working class, both urban and agrarian. During the crucial 1959 deadlock within the revolutionary government – between President Urrutia (speaking for the middle class) and the guerrillas (75 percent of whom were rural-wage labourers, *not* to be confused with landed peasants), it was precisely this mass base that definitively resolved the dispute in favour of the latter. Not a recourse to arms by the guerrillas, but the massive general strike of June–July 1959 led by the Cuban Confederation of Labor (CTC) determined most deeply the trajectory of the Cuban revolution.<sup>42</sup> Hence, cultural democracy, far from being a simple vanguard accomplishment, has in fact been yet

40 Benavides Rodriquez 1982, pp. 70–3; and Perez-Stable 1985, pp. 291–306.

41 Petras 1970, p. 108.

42 Petras 1970, p. 110.

another expression of the Cuban populace actively participating in national affairs. Revealingly, the degree to which this majority participation has greatly expanded the cultural resources of Cuba helps us to understand what a critic for the *New York Times* could not, when, in 1979, he praised the exceptional quality of the Cuban National Ballet as being out of all proportion to the country's small size and beyond its limited resources.<sup>43</sup>

### The Problem of Popular Culture

In concluding our discussion about the democratisation of culture and the transformation of the public, some general observations are in line about the nature of art fostered by these new circumstances. As is now clear, concomitant with an altered view of art's relation to society has been a redefinition of art itself. To a greater degree than in most other countries, Cuba has advanced a fundamental insight by Caribbean writer Frantz Fanon in his book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). As Fanon noted here, and as Cuban critics like Roberto Fernández Retamar or Roberto Segre have further shown, there are crucial differences between a progressive popular culture drawing on indigenous art and a regressive cultural populism based on Western mass culture.<sup>44</sup> Far from being the mere revival of static forms from the past, popular culture entails the collective effort of a people in the ongoing process of self-definition – a process of self-definition that both draws on the past and progresses beyond it by means of new ideas from the present.

While the populist images of Western mass culture (Coca-Cola Billboards, Walt Disney Comics, Las Vegas architecture, TV soap operas) are entirely engineered from above by multinational corporations in order to sell products, inculcate hierarchical values, and further ethnocentrism, the *genuine* popular culture of a Third World country is necessarily generated from below by the most exploited sectors and in marked opposition to the above-mentioned values of corporate capital.<sup>45</sup> Such a process of cultural self-realisation leading to the construction of a popular culture is necessarily one based on an appreciation of ethnicity that, mediated by international solidarity with others involved in a comparable national struggle for equality, precludes ethnocentrism, always an ideology of privilege. Significantly, one of the most salient characteristics

43 Robertson 1979, pp. D18 ff.

44 Fanon 1968, p. 232. See also Fernández Retamar 1972.

45 See, for example, Dorfman and Mattelart 1971; and Dorfman 1983.

of Cuban art, and a trait for which Cuban posters and paintings are especially well-known, is an internationalist orientation that complements the immense amount of aid (medical, educational, engineering, and military) Cuba provides to over thirty countries in the Third World.<sup>46</sup>

Cuban posters, which were influential in the 1960s on the New Left, are among the most famous artworks produced since 1959. Many of these posters are indicative of an acute internationalism, particularly those by Elena Serrano and Antonio Perez, who use the visual dynamics of European Pop Art; by Raul Martínez, who draws on the bold graphic design of North American Pop Art; by Eduardo Muñoz Bachs, whose playful draughtsmanship bears an affinity to that of Paul Klee; by Alfredo Rostgaard, who uses a sensual line coupled with simplified forms, reminiscent of Matisse and the Mediterranean tradition; and by Felix Beltrán, who uses the formal reduction of minimalism. All of these visual references are further expanded by the subtlety and singularity with which contemporary issues are addressed, both on a national and international level.<sup>47</sup>

Related tendencies exist in oil painting, some of which started before 1959. Wifredo Lam, a younger member of the Surrealist group and one favourably regarded by André Breton, created a Picassoid style featuring the spatial plenum of Caribbean foliage with a variable palette.<sup>48</sup> Always a partisan of the Cuban Revolution until his death in 1982, Lam was an important transitional figure in the arts from avant-garde radicalism to revolutionary art. From the 1930s, Lam consistently reaffirmed Afro-Cuban elements within a European framework, thus being a seminal figure in oil painting. Another major artist responsible for synthesising various visual traditions from the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, and Mesoamerica was René Portocarrero, who, until his death in 1985, was Cuba's most acclaimed artist. Portocarrero, who was given a large retrospective last year at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Spain, often used a dense all-over of Caribbean sensibility with a deft calligraphic line sometimes recalling Matisse, as well as the outlined contours of colonial *vitrales* in Cuba. In addition, his work uses a broad tropical palette and, sometimes, clear references to the ceremonial plumage of ancient Mayan art, as well as allusions to the revolutionary symbol *manigua redentora* ('redemptive bushland').<sup>49</sup>

46 Eckstein 1985, pp. 372–90.

47 For further discussion, see Kunzle 1975a and 1975b; and Cockcroft 1983.

48 Breton 1975 [1941].

49 René Portocarrero: *Colecciones del Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, La Habana*, (December 1984–January 1985).

The work of the Cuban poster artists, along with that of Lam and Portocarrero, is significant because of the way it expresses a synthesis of popular culture with international concerns. As such, this art underscores Fanon's correlation of the difference between popular culture and populism with the distinction between national self-determination and nationalism. Indeed, Samir Amin has written – in light of the modern history of Western colonialism, as well as the contemporary underdevelopment of many countries by the West – that the aspiration to national self-determination is as important for ending the dependency of the Third World, as the threat of nationalism in the West is essential for maintaining that dependency.<sup>50</sup> A corollary of the impetus toward national sovereignty when self-determination is pursued in a consistent and systematic way by one country is that the peoples of *all* other countries have an equal right to national self-determination as well – an idea patently at odds with the dictates of nationalism which permit such routine references to neighbouring countries as 'our backyard' or 'our sphere of influence'. The latter tendency of Western nationalism, especially in a more advanced form known as fascism, invariably appeals to a restoration of the 'aristocratic' order 'ordained' by nature.<sup>51</sup>

Yet a danger facing any country struggling for cultural self-determination is that of simply rejecting Western European culture *in toto*, in favour of an uncritical revival of indigenous art forms. Among those who warned against an undialectical displacement of the gains of hegemonic high culture with a simple reversion to subaltern popular traditions was Antonio Gramsci, who has been a major influence in Cuba on the architectural criticism of Roberto Segre.<sup>52</sup> In noting that any subaltern culture will attest to the never entirely dominated aesthetic impulses of a subjugated people, as was the case with the musical culture produced by Afro-Cuban slaves within colonial society, Gramsci observed that such a subaltern culture would also be branded by the intellectual insularity of those denied access to other bodies of knowledge and cultural traditions. Furthermore, as is the case with *Santería* (or voodoo), which draws on ancient African religions and now enjoys some popularity in Cuba, such popular traditions can be characterised by hierarchical relations at odds with genuine social equality, by a recourse to irrationalism or mysticism at odds with the requisite rational discourse for majority rule, and by a closed

50 Amin 1982, pp. 167–232.

51 For a concise critique of fascist ideology, see Marcuse 1954, pp. 402–19.

52 For a discussion of Gramsci on popular culture, see Cirese 1982, pp. 212–47. For a look at Roberto Segre's treatment of these themes, see, for example, Segre 1970; Segre, 1978; and Segre 1985, pp. 59–67.

set of repeated cultural rituals at odds with any historical process of social transformation and rigorous self-criticism in the cultural sphere.

Gramsci's reservations about an uncritical use of indigenous culture have often, if not always been shared by the populace in Cuba. Consequently, the elevation of popular cultural traditions as a vocabulary for new art has been accompanied by the increased accessibility of European high culture, such as ballet, symphonic music, and Western visual art, as a common part of the public's artistic experience. Revealingly, one of the most remarkable successes of recent cultural developments has been the way ballet, with hardly any Cuban audience at all before 1959, and still one of the most elite cultural forms in the West, has become one of the most popular art forms in Cuba. At present, the demand for ballet classes around the country is such that the *Casas de cultura* and the Ministry of Culture cannot keep up with it. Not only has it produced a number of newly acclaimed ballet dancers in the tradition of Alicia Alonso, Cuba has also been influenced in its gender relationships by this success. In the early years after the revolution, there was much opposition to the training of boys as ballet dancers, since this art form was considered effeminate. Now the opposition has dissipated and Cuba has produced some famous male dancers, such as Jorge Esquivel. Furthermore, the National Ballet of Cuba has effectively incorporated popular dance forms into its own performances, thus synthesising European and Afro-Cuban culture. It was precisely such developments as these that Ernesto Cardenal had in mind when he wrote: 'In Cuba, as contrasted with Russia, there has been no attempt to create a simple art that can be immediately understood by the people; rather there has been an education of the people to the point where they understand the complexity of art. I was told that this has been the official policy of the revolution.'<sup>53</sup>

### Further Barriers to Cultural Democracy

To say that much has been achieved is neither to claim that little is left to be done nor to deny that serious problems have yet to be resolved. Indeed, when Cardenal asked a Cuban poet about the role of writers in the revolution, the poet responded: 'For us that function must be criticism'.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, Cardenal himself observed that in Cuba it is very easy to distinguish true revolutionaries by the way they discuss the revolution: true revolutionaries are

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53 Cardenal 1972, p. 189.

54 Cardenal 1972, p. 239.

critical in their discussions of it, false revolutionaries are not. Nonetheless, this observation is misleading if not accompanied by the recognition that there are still barriers to publishing such criticism. While critical remarks can and do appear in films or public dialogues, criticism in printed form is much less common because of the fact that both daily newspapers are controlled by the Communist Party.

The absence of independent daily publications on the part of the labour unions, as well as other mass organisations not formally linked to the Communist Party, attenuates the further expansion of public discourse and constricts essential avenues for constructive criticism. Thus, the situation of the press – which has been criticised as inadequate by Julio Cortázar and Mario Benedetti, both of whom were strong partisans of the revolution<sup>55</sup> – also contradicts the general tendency, since the 1970s, to decentralise power and to democratise decision-making. In a word, the only two daily newspapers in Cuba are official organs of an organisation which constitutes a very small minority of factory workers and of the population in general. Even Fidel Castro has conceded that this situation is ‘unhealthy’.<sup>56</sup> Yet, so far, the requisite measures to change these circumstances have not been forthcoming.

Contrary to Western ideology about what constitutes a ‘free press’ (*private* ownership of it, coupled with minimal governmental, or *public* involvement), the democratisation of the daily mass media in Cuba would hardly be achieved by any regression to a press privately owned, hence one necessarily *anti*-democratic in *structural* terms. A public (decentralised) culture is inherently incompatible with a private (centralised) press. Indeed, the existence of such a private press in the US, as well as in Western Europe, is a major means whereby the ‘aristocracy of culture’ so profusely documented by Bourdieu is sustained. The reason for the utter exclusivity of the mainstream Western press – which generally functions as a corporation both logistically, as well as ideologically, and is in turn largely owned by a consortium of the most powerful multinational corporations – has been well summarised by A.J. Leibling: freedom of the press belongs to those who own one.<sup>57</sup> Or in other words, since a prerequisite of ‘free speech’ on an extended basis is the extensive accumulation of capital, ‘freedom of the press’ in the West is *not* an affair of the majority, who are unable to buy a press in order to be heard on a national level (here one is reminded of Marx’s acute observation that the first guarantee of a free press is that the press not be

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55 Cardenal 1972, p. 153.

56 Lockwood 1969, p. 114.

57 See Parenti 1986; and Herman 1982.

a business). Thus, Cuba's pressing dilemma with regard to the press cannot be resolved by recourse to the Western model for it – a model utterly unaccountable to the majority in both managerial and editorial terms, as if multinational corporations alone have the right to discuss issues in a 'public' arena.

Yet, it does not follow, as the problem in Cuba shows, that to have public control *over* the mass media is synonymous with public access *to* the mass media. Insofar as a small minority speaks *for*, rather than *with*, the majority, there is an unacceptable passivity intrinsic to the majority role, *even when* the majority is in complete agreement with the minority. As such, a necessary though not sufficient precondition for democratising the press is the further *de-centralisation* of power, so that the state does not speak for the public, but instead implements consensual decisions arrived at in the broadest possible public debate.

Nonetheless, this process of augmenting the public domain will not automatically translate into a greater public access to running the press, even though such a change would enhance the dynamic towards *poder local* and *autogestion*. In fact, the 1976 Constitution of Cuba, which guarantees 'freedom of speech' to all citizens (Article 52), attests to the still somewhat uncertain political relationship between the Communist Party and the populace as a whole – an uncertainty that explains in part the unresolved predicament of the press with regard to cultural democracy. Article 4 of the Constitution gives ultimate political power to the municipal governments, which directly represent the majority, while Article 5 grants final decision-making power to the Communist Party, which as an internal organisation of select members is only indirectly accountable to the majority of people in Cuba. So far, the daily mass press has tended to function with regard to Article 5, rather than with respect to Article 4, even though these two articles are obviously assumed to be mutually determining.<sup>58</sup>

As a last note, it should be pointed out – primarily because of a misguided notion religiously repeated in the Western press – that the still uneven and sometimes ambiguous relationship between the Communist Party and organs of *poder local* has not resulted in an unremitting stream of dictatorial decisions in the press. Vigorous debates over the nature of art, as well as the quality of particular artworks, have occurred in print in the major journals of arts and letters (if not so often, unfortunately, in the daily press).<sup>59</sup> Significantly, *Casa de las Americas* has recently published strong criticisms by Julio

58 Center for Cuban Studies 1983 (*Constitution of the Republic of Cuba*), pp. 3–4.

59 For a look at these polemics, see González Echevarría 1985a, pp. 163–7.



Cortázar of the Cuban government in its handling of the notorious Padilla case (1971).<sup>60</sup> Probably the worst mistake so far made in the cultural realm within Cuba, this error involved the detention and interrogation of author Heberto Padilla for four weeks, because the black tone of his writings was perceived as 'counter-revolutionary' in certain governmental circles (although Padilla was honoured in other groups). After Cortázar and other Latin American, as well as European, intellectuals sharply disagreed with these actions, the Cuban government backed off sheepishly from this intimidation, with Fidel Castro himself personally intervening to secure Padilla another job. Cubans have now come to view the Padilla case as in contradiction with the other cultural advances otherwise being made. The commendable publication in Cuba of Cortázar's criticisms is a further public concession that the Padilla case was a grave mistake that should not be repeated.

While the treatment of Padilla in Cuba was disturbing, the continued assessment in the Western press of this treatment is deplorable. Far from seeing this as an unusual case – which, of course, accounts for its notoriety – the mainstream media in the US and Western Europe have presumed it to be the normal state of cultural affairs in Cuba. Even the clearly documented facts of the case have been misrepresented, with a recent article in *The New York Times* referring to Padilla's imprisonment as being 10 years in duration!! Furthermore, a lack of rigour in examining this case coupled with a dearth of serious scholarship in general has led publications like *The Village Voice*, a liberal weekly, to impute Padilla-style treatment to other Cuban artists as well. In fact, in August of 1984, a Cuban exile named Nestor Almendros claimed in *The Village Voice* that Gutierrez Alea's aforementioned film, *Hasta Cierta Punto*, had been banned in Cuba and the film-director himself placed in a precarious position. *Yet one week before reading this article, I personally watched as Hasta Cierta Punto, while visiting in Havana, spoke to people at the Film Institute about it (most of whom praised it), and discussed the film with several ordinary Cubans (who had a variety of reactions to it).* Only half a year later did *The Village Voice* bother to ascertain whether or not all these easy accusations against the Cuban government were correct (no small matter itself since the Reagan administration has revoked 'freedom to travel' to Cuba for almost all US citizens who are not academicians). When, however, *The Voice* did finally run an interview with Tomás Gutierrez Alea himself, the Cuban filmmaker disproved what they had earlier maintained.<sup>61</sup>

60 Casa de las Americas 1984. See the review of this monograph by Aquirre 1985, p. 2.

61 Fernández 1985, pp. 45 ff.

Here as elsewhere, the mainstream Western press is able to maintain that a 'free press' exists in the US, while being completely absent from Cuba, only by means of a monumental case of historical amnesia. Yet when we weigh the Cuban improprieties with Padilla against the US expulsion of Charlie Chaplin and Angel Rama purely for political reasons, along with the denial of US travel visas to Pablo Picasso, García Márquez, Julio Cortázar, and Graham Greene, to name only a well-known few, it is quite clear that the above formulation of 'free speech' in the US versus 'nonfree speech' in Cuba is simple-minded at best.<sup>62</sup> Nor did *The Village Voice*, when it creatively imagined the mistreatment of Gutierrez Alea in Cuba, care to reflect less dreamily on how the US government has actually censored Gutierrez Alea here. In 1973, for example, after Gutierrez Alea was given a special award by the National Society of Film Critics in the US and was to be honoured at a banquet, the Cuban film-maker was not allowed into North America by the US State Department. Furthermore, and more shockingly, when the First New York Festival of Cuban Cinema was opened in 1973, the federal government closed it down, confiscated all the films, and drove the co-sponsor of the festival, American Documentary Films, into bankruptcy.<sup>63</sup> All of this makes clear that the current presence in Miami of Heberto Padilla has less to do with any sincere commitment to 'free speech' on the part of the US, than it does to the *type* of ideological speech Padilla has now come to symbolise.

Ironically, the mainstream Western media, particularly those in the US, will be unable to criticise Cuban culture legitimately until they gravitate away from the uncritical, and utterly reflexive dismissal of Cuban culture. Here as elsewhere, a scholarly grasp of the pertinent data remains a *sine qua non* for focusing on the failings – failings which can only be assessed fairly in the context of concomitant successes. The problem is not that the US media and many in academia criticise Cuba, but rather that they do so for reasons hopelessly misinformed and transparently self-serving. Yet, only criticism that is based on extensive knowledge, as well as being devoid of hypocrisy, is worthwhile in assessing the cultural development of revolutionary Cuba. When such constructive criticism of Cuba is finally accomplished on a regular basis in the US, a considerable service will have been done not only the Cuban people, but also the North American public. Then, and only then, will cultural democracy be advanced in both countries at the same time.

62 See, for example, 'USA(2): *Undesirable Aliens*' *Index on Censorship*, Vol. 9, No. 5, October 1980: 8–11.

63 Burton 1985, pp. 134–5.

## The Latin American Origins of Alternative Modernism

As we approach the end of a millennium, we seem to be suffering from an excess of negative historical verdicts that in turn signal a lack of critical rigour in assessing modern developments. Nowhere is this observation more pertinent than to the postmortems for modernism that now endlessly circulate throughout academe and the art world. A revealing example of this ill-advised rush to dismiss modernism *as a whole* can be found, for example, in the otherwise commendable writings of art critic Thomas McEvelley, who wrote the following:

It can now be recognized that Modernist internationalism was a somewhat deceptive designation for Western claims of universal hegemony ... Modernist internationalism was a form of imperial assertion by which non-Western cultures would assimilate to Western mores. But as Modernism fetishized sameness, post-Modernism fetishizes difference ... [T]his [post-Modernist] project requires art to question and critique the very culture that produces it ... Modernist art, by presenting beautiful objects lacking in apparent content, implied that the society producing such objects was also beautiful.<sup>1</sup>

So, here we have it in quite Manichean terms: modernism is bad; postmodernism is good. The former is a wing of cultural imperialism and the latter is simply a means of thwarting it. Yet, McEvelley's statement above presupposes a number of untenable claims, such as the assumption that the phenomenon of modernism in the arts was monolithic and nondifferential, as well as *essentially* Eurocentric. Unfortunately, McEvelley here implicitly starts off his *criticism* of modernism with an utterly *uncritical* acceptance of the late Clement Greenberg's implausibly reductive definition of modernism.

Contrary to what both Greenberg *and* many of his opponents would have us believe, however, modernist art from the late nineteenth century until the late 1950s can hardly be reduced either to a unified vision or to a uniform aes-

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<sup>1</sup> McEvelley 1992, p. 11.

thetic. Even less can it be forcibly restricted to the doctrine of 'medium purity' or to a defence of so-called 'pure western values', both of which Greenberg maintained that modernism embodied.<sup>2</sup> Here as elsewhere we must begin by recalling Samir Amin's incisive point that most 'Western values' are not just Western.<sup>3</sup>

To speak with insight and sensitivity of modernist art from the late 1800s till the post-1945 period is *to speak of a plurality of related but also notably divergent and even fractious tendencies*, some of which were grounded in a broad-ranging multiculturalism and were part of an uneven, non-linear development that contravenes the linear concept of historical progress intrinsic to Western modernisation. These latter tendencies within modernism, which (following Oriana Baddeley and Valerie Fraser) I shall call 'alternative modernism', were generally far more progressive than others that are also classifiable as modernist. (Such is also the case with the diverse set of tendencies that are far too easily grouped together under the overly generalised rubric of 'postmodernism').<sup>4</sup> This multi-lateral state of affairs has yet to be duly acknowledged either by Greenberg's canonical definition of modernism or even by many of the counterarguments of postmodernists. Indeed, what has often been canonised by both sides in this debate is less modernist art than Greenberg's own highly bowdlerised and quite homogeneous definition of it.

Before I proceed any further, though, let me emphasise that I am not speaking here as an apologist for modernism in all its multifarious forms, but rather as one who believes that we need to discuss modernism in a far more stringent and differentiated way than has often occurred in recent years. Nor do I wish to argue that we have nothing left to learn from contemporary commentators like McEvilley or even from orthodox formalists like Greenberg. In fact, I think that we do. But, surely the question properly put is *not* 'Modernism, right or wrong?' We need to advance beyond modernism critically, rather than be dismissive of it (which would not constitute a legitimate advance). To do so, we must begin by avoiding sweeping referendums and *ad hoc* tribunals that simply decide for or against modernism, as if modernism itself were not a deeply contradictory project marked by a plurality of divergent tendencies, thus being constituted by both progressive and regressive moments simultaneously.

In order to dispel some of the incomprehension that currently enshrouds the overly hasty negative verdicts against modernism in its entirety, I shall try

2 See Craven 1994, pp. 3–9 (Chapter 13 of this book).

3 Amin 1989, p. vii; see also Gilroy 1993.

4 Baddeley and Fraser, 1989. See also Eder 1991, pp. 67–81.

to accomplish at least two different things in this article: first, I shall reconstruct empirically the largely overlooked non-European etymology of the concept of modernism, along with the anti-colonial strain of it that has been christened 'alternative modernism'. Such an analysis will entail a discussion of the poetry of Rubén Darío and the paintings of Diego Rivera in relation to artworks by Antoni Gaudí, Pablo Picasso and Paul Klee.

Second, I shall highlight the theory of history, specifically the conception of uneven historical development, that is presupposed by this above-noted minority voice within modernism. This is a tendency that has in fact contributed notably to an emergent postcolonial discourse that has become so significant at the end of the twentieth century. When all of this has been done, it will become ever more clear that postmodernism at its most profound is often a dissenting way of understanding and absorbing the progressive moments within modernism and thus in turn of advancing beyond them.<sup>5</sup>

### Rubén Darío and the Invention of Early Modernism

It comes as a surprise for many of us to discover that, far from being coined in the metropolitan West, the term 'modernism' (or *modernismo*) was in fact invented in the 1880s on the periphery of the world economic order by Rubén Darío of Nicaragua, Latin America's first internationally acclaimed modern author and still one of her most influential poets. Darío, who lived from 1867 to 1916, inaugurated Latin America's earliest genuine avant-garde movement under the banner of *modernism*. He evidently first used this term around 1885/86 to refer to novel attributes in the writings of Mexican author Ricardo Contreras.<sup>6</sup>

In formal terms, Darío's own *modernismo* in such poems as *Azul* (1888) constituted a hybrid fusion of various artistic modes featuring heterogeneous cultural citations that were both European and non-European, along with being at once pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial in origin. All of these divergent elements were in turn densely interwoven with references to experiences gleaned from the five senses.<sup>7</sup> Among the contemporary visual artists about

5 For three fine assessments of postmodernism along these lines, see Huyssen 1986, pp. 179–221; Foster 1983; and Roberts 1990.

6 For the etymology of the term '*modernismo*', see Ureña 1954, p. 158; see also Jiménez 1962; and Rama 1920.

7 For a fine analysis of Darío's poetry and politics, see Franco 1970; and Franco 1967, pp. 142–7. See also Whisnant 1992, pp. 7–49; Torres 1966; and Watland 1965.

whom Darío wrote were the French sculptor Rodin and the late Symbolist Latin American painter Angel Zárraga.<sup>8</sup>

Revealingly, when in 1912 he wrote an essay for *Mundial Magazine* about the paintings of Zárraga, Darío selected Rivera's portrait of Zárraga to accompany his essay. Furthermore, in this same issue of *Mundial* there was a brief discussion of Diego Rivera's modernist paintings by another Latin American author.<sup>9</sup> To a considerable extent, Darío was to *modernismo* what Apollinaire was to Cubism, Marinetti was to Futurism, and Breton was to Surrealism. In all four of these cases, a literary figure, specifically a poet, played a key role in articulating the project of an avant-garde movement many of whose most well-known practitioners turned out to be painters. (And here I am using the term 'avant-garde movements' so as to draw on the key concepts as associated with them in the now classic studies by Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger).<sup>10</sup>

The general dynamic of his poetry was driven, on the one hand, by a reaction against the outdated and ossified literary conventions of official Spanish letters and it was motivated, on the other hand, by an assimilation of certain new developments in nineteenth-century French literature that were then combined with pre-Columbian cultural traditions of the remote past. The view motivating this unlikely synthesis was articulated by Darío as follows in *Prosas profanos* (1896): 'If there is poetry in our America, it is to be found in the old things'.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, this notable reference to the artistic representation of '*nuestra América*' by the founding figure of modernism also reminds us of the earlier and still celebrated essay of 1891 that had first popularised throughout Latin America the explicitly non-Eurocentric phrase of 'our America'. This essay, entitled simply 'Nuestra America', was written by José Martí (1852–95), the only Latin American writer of the second half of the nineteenth century who rivalled Darío in prestige and importance.<sup>12</sup> (Incidentally, Martí was also an art critic of note who praised French Impressionism and wrote reviews of Mexican artists, such as Diego Rivera's teachers Santiago Rebull and José María Velasco.)<sup>13</sup>

8 Darío 1912, pp. 640–1. This included the reproduction of Diego Rivera's *Portrait of (Retrato de) Angel Zárraga*.

9 Brendel 1912, pp. 623–4.

10 See Poggioli 1974; and Bürger 1984.

11 Darío 1994a, p. 180: '*Si hay poesía en nuestra América, ella está en las cosas viejas: en Palenke y Uatatlán, en el indio legendario y el inca sensual y fino, y en el gran Moctezuma de la silla de oro. Lo demás es tuyo, demócrata Walt Whitman*'.

12 Martí 1977, pp. 84–95.

13 See Martí 1979.

Revealingly, Martí's celebrated essay called for the construction of a postcolonial, multi-racial, and transcultural society. In fact, Martí, who was a leader of the movement for national liberation in Cuba, was killed in 1895 while he was engaged in the armed struggle against Western, specifically Spanish, colonialism.<sup>14</sup>

Such a new multi-ethnic society would presuppose a fundamental rethinking of history, so that, according to Martí, 'The history of America, from the Incas to the present, must be taught in clear detail and to the letter, even if the archons of Greece are overlooked. Our Greece must take priority over the Greece that is not ours'.<sup>15</sup> Aside from colonial peonage, there were the grave impediments of racism and imperialism that blocked the path of reconstituting the Americas along more socially just lines. Accordingly, Martí closed his 1891 essay with two warnings: first, '[w]hoever foments and spreads antagonism and hate between the races, sins against humanity'; and second, '[t]he scorn of our formidable neighbor [the United States] who does not know us is Our America's greatest danger'.<sup>16</sup>

These themes of anti-imperialism and of racial harmony in concert with multiculturalism were abiding artistic concerns of Darío's mosaic-like concept of modernism. In the VII canto of his book *Cantos de vida y esperanza* (1905), which is entitled 'To Roosevelt', Darío penned a critique of imperial intervention and soulless utilitarianism that, because of its soaring poetry and pungent politics, has remained a favourite of Central American audiences ever since (particularly in the mid-1980s during the high point of the Sandinista-led revolution in Nicaragua).<sup>17</sup> In the opening section, Darío declared as follows:

Es con voz de la Biblia, o verso de Walt Whitman  
que habría que llegar hasta ti, Cazador!  
¡Primitivo y moderno, sencillo y complicado,  
con un algo de Washington y cuarto de Nemrod!  
Eres los Estados Unidos,  
eres el futuro invasor  
de la América ingenua que tiene sangre indígena,

14 Martí 1977, p. 58.

15 Martí 1977, p. 88.

16 Martí 1977, pp. 93–4.

17 See Whisnant 1992, pp. 7–49.

[It was with a Biblical voice or the verse of Walt Whitman  
 that you arrived amongst us, O hunter!  
 Primitive and modern, simple and complex,  
 With something of George Washington and a quarter Nemrod!  
 You are the United States  
 You are the future invader  
 of the ingenuous America that has indigenous blood,]<sup>18</sup>

Further on in the same canto, Darío critically contrasts, on the one hand, the threatening colossus of the North, which had cynically combined the cult of Hercules and the worship of money, with, on the other hand, '*la América nuestra, que tenía poetas/desde los viejos tiempos de Netzahualcoyotl ... la América del grande Moctezuma, del Inca*'.<sup>19</sup> (This criticism of the materialism and positivism of North American modernisation was also a prominent theme during this same period in the work of the other Latin American *modernistas*, such as José Enrique Rodó of Uruguay.) Furthermore, the nature of his own critique of the West helps us to understand Darío's recorded sympathy for the 1905 Revolution in Russia – a fact that had gone largely ignored until Sandinista commandante Carlos Fonseca did research on it during the mid-1960s.<sup>20</sup>

Darío's critique was coupled with stark depictions of a view that had first emerged with European Romanticism, namely, that of the artist's alienation from bourgeois society. (Darío's relationship to this theme has been discussed brilliantly by Jean Franco.) In his story *El rey burgués*, Darío told of the contemporary fate of the artist as one of being condemned to play a barrel-organ in the snow because he had defied the values of middle-class society.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, in his prose poem *Canción del oro*, Darío wrote of a poet/beggar who sings ironic odes to the Golden Calf, or cash nexus, being widely worshipped in a society that was being transformed by economic modernisation.<sup>22</sup>

In sum, the original modernism of Darío – with its collagelike formal language of *mestizaje* and multiculturalism – embodied precisely that multilateral trajectory that Dore Ashton perceptively identified when she spoke of how modernist art at its most profound 'moved backward and forward at the same

18 Darío 1994a, pp. 255–6.

19 Ibid.

20 Rodó 1988 [1900], 1988. See also González Echevarría 1985b, pp. 8–32.

21 Darío 1994b, pp. 127–31.

22 Darío 1994b, pp. 141–4.



time'.<sup>23</sup> As such, Darío's modernism was inflected by an alienation from capitalist social values, pervaded by an opposition to Western colonialism, imbued with a desire to revivify, or at least reuse, the non-Western and pre-colonial artistic traditions of Latin America without, however, repudiating that which was still of great value in Western art – and, finally, it was marked by an ambivalent embrace of what Charles Baudelaire had earlier called *modernité* (or modernity) in a well-known essay of 1863.<sup>24</sup>

Here, I think, it would be worthwhile to correct a very common misconception in art historical literature of the West. For Baudelaire's essay, 'Le peintre de la vie moderne' ('The Painter of Modern Life'), was neither a definition for nor a theorisation of modernism, however much it did contribute to Darío's more theoretically self-conscious formulation of modernism later on.<sup>25</sup> When Baudelaire wrote: 'By "*modernity*" I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal, the immutable',<sup>26</sup> he was simply defining modernity as the social experience of economic modernisation, to which the cultural practices and artistic responses of modernism would subsequently come to constitute a more self-conscious, often dissident, and increasingly self-critical rejoinder.

This latter point was unintentionally made clear by Baudelaire's choice of the minor late Romantic artist Constantin Guys, rather than his proto-modernist friend Edouard Manet, as the 'painter of modern life'.<sup>27</sup> In fact, Darío's closest counterpart in French literature was Stéphane Mallarmé who, according to Roland Barthes and Marcel Duchamp, was the first French modernist, even though he himself generally employed the more restrictive but also early modernist term of *Symbolist*. This Symbolist movement of the late 1880s and 1890s is justifiably seen as marking the advent of both modernism and the avant-garde in France.<sup>28</sup> The modern visual artists for whom Darío showed a preference were themselves late Symbolists.

Here, of course, I am following Perry Anderson and Marshall Berman in defining these above-noted terms, so that *modernism* designates the minority artistic tendencies in opposition to, yet also tied to, the official high cul-

23 Dore Ashton, public lecture on Modernism at the Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico, April 1994.

24 Baudelaire 1965 [1863], pp. 12–15.

25 Rubén Darío certainly was influenced by Baudelaire, as Jean Franco and others have pointed out. See Franco 1967, pp. 357–63.

26 Baudelaire 1965 [1863], pp. 12–15.

27 Ibid.

28 See, for example, Barthes 1983, pp. 75–7.

ture in the West. Similarly, just as the various tendencies of modernism were ambivalent and varied responses to the social experience of *modernity*, so the latter was a complexly mediated manifestation of the economic project of capitalist modernisation and its allied programme of Western imperialism.<sup>29</sup> Despite the fact that modernism, modernity and modernisation are routinely used as synonyms in much art historical literature, it must be emphasised that they *have always existed only in asymmetrical and unsettled relation to each other*.

Consequently, we need also to note that the orthodox Marxist framework of base/superstructure is simply inadequate to grapple empirically with this asymmetry and the attendant relative autonomy of each of these various domains within society, as Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson among others have noted.<sup>30</sup> The first step towards clarifying the plurality of practices known as 'modernism', then, involves an understanding of how these three terms (modernism, modernity and modernisation) have assumed quite different historical relationships and tensions, depending on *which tendency within modernism one has in mind and also on the moment in history that is being addressed*.

### Early Alternative Modernism in the Visual Arts

It was only after the Latin American term 'modernism' crossed the Atlantic to discover Europe in the 1880s – and its first port-of-call was Barcelona, not Paris – that it began to designate certain formal strategies and thematic concerns in the visual arts that were analogous to those that were found in Rubén Darío's modernist poetry and which are now associated with the European avant-garde and various tendencies of modernism in the more widely acknowledged sense. Just as Darío, while living in Spain, would have a significant influence on 1890s Spanish literature, so three of the major alternative modernists of the early twentieth century, namely, Antoni Gaudí, Diego Rivera and Pablo Picasso, spent formative years in Barcelona. Like Darío, the latter two figures frequented the anarchist and bohemian enclave of the *El Quatro Gats* café. Indeed, Picasso even designed the menu for this café and Rubén Darío left us a vivid description of its décor.<sup>31</sup>

29 Anderson 1984, pp. 97–8. See also Berman 1982, pp. 15–16.

30 Thompson 1978, p. 98.

31 See Casary 1972, p. 66. For a fine look at Picasso's relation to the café, see the catalogue

The label of *modernismo* (or *arte modernista*) was evidently first used in the visual arts, while Darío was in Spain, to refer to such work as Antoni Gaudí's architectural projects in Barcelona, the *fin-de-siècle* city where Pablo Picasso lived and worked from 1895 to 1904. It was, then, the distinctly anti-colonial modernism of Barcelona, with a Latin American accent, that first gave us Gaudí and then helped to spawn Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* plus the 'Anáhuac Cubism' of Diego Rivera, as Justino Fernández has aptly labelled it.<sup>32</sup> (And while the term *modernismo* generally denoted the Catalán version of *art nouveau*, in the case of both Gaudí and Picasso this early designation of *modernist* obviously signified much else as well, thus expanding the concept of modernism so as to accommodate the even more divergent network of artistic directions that would soon emerge elsewhere.) In this sense Catalán *modernismo* was both a distinct tendency *within* modernism proper and a point of departure for developing other tendencies of modernism later on.<sup>33</sup>

As is now widely noted, Catalán modernism in the work of Gaudí evinced a strikingly ambidexterous ability to go both forward and backward in history simultaneously. At once a person of the past and a partisan of the future, Gaudí used ultra-modern materials (he was the first architect in Spain to use reinforced concrete, which he employed for example in the Parque Güell) in conjunction with the time-hallowed artisanal approach to traditional materials such as ashlar, plus archaic building motifs that were both Western and non-Western in nature.<sup>34</sup> The singular-looking towers of Sagrada Familia came from the Berber building traditions of North Africa; the use of *azulejos* (or blue ceramic tiles) on the facades of edifices was *mudéjar*, or Moorish, in origin; the inclusion of Gothic arches was Catalán in derivation; and the recourse to modern engineering techniques along with new materials such as steel arose from the influence of northern European modernisation, even as Gaudí was also apparently inspired by the utopian socialism of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement (as Kenneth Frampton has noted).<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps Gaudí's best known aphorism is that 'originality is achieved by returning to origins'<sup>36</sup> and it should be connected not only to his reaffirmation of the local artisanal traditions of Cataluña (his father was a coppersmith and

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essay: McCully 1978. For a broader look at the relation of anarchism to avant-garde art and popular culture in Barcelona, see Kaplan 1992.

32 Cited by Debroise 1979, p. 65.

33 See Ife and Butte 1991, pp. 212–13.

34 Frampton 1980, pp. 64–73.

35 Ibid.

36 Gaudí 1982, p. 93: 'Originalidad es volver al origen'.

his grandfather was a ceramicist), but also to Gaudí's ardent commitment to the Catalán national autonomy movement against the imperial hegemony of Castile. It was, for example, this preoccupation with contesting the hegemonic dominion of the Spanish national state that led Gaudí to design a serrated roofline for the Casa Milá, which symbolically echoed the shape of Montserrat, the mountain that had long been a signifier of Catalán independence and which also served as an important subject for Diego Rivera's own landscape paintings while he was in Barcelona in 1911.<sup>37</sup>

Easily the best metaphor for Gaudí's distinctive concept of modernism is an invention resulting from it, namely, the modernist 'collage' that he used at Parque Güell only shortly before Picasso introduced collage into painting in 1912. On the upper deck of Parque Güell, above the market area that is sheltered by reinforced concrete beams and supported by a whimsical red sandstone Doric portico, there are outdoor benches that feature what was probably the first and what still remains one of the most striking architectonic 'collages' or modernist mosaics ever produced in the visual arts. This mosaic collage was fashioned from the broken shards and left-over fragments of rejects from a local Catalán ceramic workshop, as well as from the rubble of fractured glass and tableware.<sup>38</sup> A cobbled-together *mélange* of ruins that signify the unevenness of historical development to which Gaudí's entire *oeuvre* so eloquently attests, this modernist mosaic/collage was also a metaphor for the multifacetedness of Catalán national identity that wedded a utopian gesture of shared public concerns in the future to a sombre sense of the past along with a view of the present as a field of ruins. Here it is important to recall that Sagrada Familia, to which Gaudí devoted the last decade of his life, originated as a lay church for the expiation of the sins of the modern materialistic age, that is, of modernisation.<sup>39</sup>

The 'collage' at Parque Güell, then, literally embodies the multiculturalism and dynamic open-endedness that have generally been a hallmark of the best alternative modernism. In addition, it encapsulated a telling historical ambivalence at once hopeful in its vision of the future and yet harsh in its view of what would precede it. A parallel for Gaudí's modernist belief in redemption among the ruins of history can be found in the late writings of Walter Benjamin, who remains one of the major theorists of modernism even as he is now routinely cited by post-modernists. (And quite rightly so, since he introduced

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37 Frampton 1980, pp. 64–73.

38 Ibid.

39 Collins 1960, p. 7, and p. 13.

such themes as the 'death of the author' – and the historical construction of the subject in his famous essays from the mid-1930s.)<sup>40</sup> Shortly before his death in 1940, Benjamin wrote eighteen 'Theses on History' in which he famously observed that 'There is no document of civilization that is not also at the same time a document of barbarism'.<sup>41</sup> The apocalyptic yet also redemptive concept of history put forth in Thesis IX bears repeating because of how deeply it relates to the alternative modernist work of Darío, Gaudí, Picasso and Rivera. It goes as follows:

A [Paul] Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* [which was in Walter Benjamin's personal collection at the time] shows an angel looking as though he were about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe that keeps piling ruin upon ruin and hurls them in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; the wind has caught his wings with such force that he can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of ruins before him grows ever skyward. This storm is what we call progress.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed as Karl Werckmeister has shown, unbeknownst to Benjamin, Klee himself discussed his artworks in similar terms in 1915, as follows: 'Today is the great transition from past to present. In the huge pit of forms there lies rubble to which one still clings in part. It furnishes the stuff for abstraction ... In order to work myself out of my rubble, I had to fly'.<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, one of Pablo Picasso's most famous aphorisms, or anti-definitions, was that '[a] painting used to be considered a sum of additions. In my case a painting is a sum of destructions'.<sup>44</sup> This alternative modernist concept of art, which seems so manifestly linked to collage, is no doubt related both to Picasso's tenure in Barcelona *modernista* and to his commendable commitment to the cause of anti-colonialism, in addition to his important affiliations with anarchist thought (at this time, Barcelona was one of the main centres

40 Benjamin 1968 [1936] pp. 217–51.

41 Benjamin 1968 [1940], p. 256.

42 Benjamin 1968 [1940], pp. 257–8.

43 Werckmeister 1982, p. 103.

44 Picasso 1972 [1935], p. 38.

in Europe for anarchism). In an excellent article and an equally commanding book, Patricia Leighton has compellingly documented not only Picasso's anti-colonialist views and concomitant anarchist vantage point, but also how they figure so significantly in his artworks of the early twentieth century.<sup>45</sup>

The celebrated *Demoiselles d'Avignon* of 1907, for example, which is named after a street in Barcelona's red light district, is not only about the uneasy confrontation of the two sexes, as Leo Steinberg has argued, and about a competition with Matisse's work, as Richard Wollheim showed in a recent lecture.<sup>46</sup> It is also about the conflict of two cultures – those of Western Europe and West Africa – whose formally conflicted convergence gains in pictorial resonance precisely because of the tensely jarring transcultural quality of the work.

And this is a quality that has now become amplified even more so because of what we have recently learned about the depth of Picasso's opposition to French colonialism in Africa at precisely the moment in history, 1906/7, when this painting was being executed. Similarly, it has also been shown that some of Picasso's collages, such as the *Bottle of Suze* of 1912, feature newspaper articles about the horrifying loss of life in Turkey during the First Balkan War of 1912 and about anti-war speeches by anarchists before huge crowds that were protesting the 'menace of a general European war' (to quote from one of the articles composing the collage that was taken from *Le Journal* in November 1912).<sup>47</sup>

As for the use of the idea of the *fragment* to explain the historical import of Cubism, we need only recall how Diego Rivera incisively defined Cubism along these lines:

It was a revolutionary movement, questioning everything that had previously been said and done in art. It held nothing sacred. As the old world would soon blow itself apart, never to be the same again, so Cubism broke down forms as they had been seen for centuries, and was creating out of the *fragments* new forms, new objects, new patterns and – ultimately – new worlds.<sup>48</sup>

It was the deftly understated, even camouflaged, quality of Cubist fragments that Thomas Crow had in mind when he observed the following of the internal

45 Leighton 1990, pp. 604–30. See also Kaplan 1992, pp. 24–8; and Joll 1980, pp. 207–57.

46 Wollheim, 'Looking at Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*', Public Lecture, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, March 5, 1996.

47 Leighton 1989, p. 13.

48 March 1991 [1960], p. 58.

dialogue between high art and mass culture, as well as between Western art and non-Western art, in many Cubist collages:

The mixing of class signifiers was central to the formation of the avant-garde sensibility ... to accept modernism's oppositional claims, we need not assume that it somehow transcends the culture of the commodity; we can see it rather as exploiting to critical purpose contradictions within and between distinct sectors of that culture ... This ceaseless switching of codes is readable as an articulate protest against the double marginalization of art ... [so that] Cubism is ... a message [with critical intent] from the margins of society ...<sup>49</sup>

Similarly, the origins of the visual language associated with Cubism in general and with collage in particular both presupposed and concretely enacted a profound critique (or deconstruction) of the nature of painting in the West. At issue was something more than the reductive exercise of working with the essence of the medium, as proponents of formalism maintain. (In fact, in a recent series of lectures Wollheim largely disallowed this Greenbergian reading of modernism by defining the medium as contingent on 'the way the artist shapes the materials', and *not* as an *a priori* given with which an artist must be resigned to work.) As such, the inception of Cubism entailed both an expansion of the communicative resources of the medium *and* a necessary contraction of the pictorial claims of European Renaissance art – that is, its illusions and illusionism.

Simultaneously, a Cubist painting both evokes and then undermines the high art conventions in the West for constructing perspectival space: as in the abbreviated use of chiaroscuro, in the coy and inconsistent deployment of overlapping, and in the original suggestion but subsequent dissolution of figurative references. In addition, there is an artful decentring of the images, so as to disallow through an almost 'anarchistic' annulment, the hierarchical structure along with the sense of formal resolution that were almost always salient traits of the classical tradition. As such, a Cubist painting, with its all-over tension between the actual two dimensions of the picture plane and the fictive three dimensions of Renaissance vintage, is not just about an interrogation of the medium (as Greenberg contended).<sup>50</sup> More importantly, modernist space in

49 Crow 1985, p. 250.

50 This is, of course, the argument made by Clement Greenberg in 'Modernist Painting'. See Greenberg 1993b [1960], pp. 85–93.

Cubist work resulted, whether intentionally or not, in a critique of the official pictorial language in mainstream Western art, of which the medium itself was one, but only one, component. Indeed, it is precisely because modernist art at its most profound was a de-hierarchising and demotic critique of the overarching *conventions* of official Western art that the collage aesthetic could become so effective at accommodating a multicultural interplay of Western and non-Western elements on equal terms.

In one of the most incisive post-formalist discussions of modernism (and I would like to insist here along with Mikhail Bakhtin that we not confuse the necessity of formal analysis with the fetish of formalism),<sup>51</sup> Rosalind Krauss has deftly illuminated further how a Cubist collage, with its distinctive use of modernist space, addresses the mechanics of pictorial logic *per se* in the West.<sup>52</sup> As Krauss has rightly observed, two of the formal strategies that develop out of collage space are those of figure/ground reversal and of the continual transposition between negative space and positive form, so that there is no visual sign without the attendant eclipse or negation of its material referent.

Thus, Cubist collage and modernist space end up critically exploring the cultural preconditions of Western representation itself, that is, how images have been produced in pictorial terms and how these images have traditionally come to assume the status of signs. Such a self-critical investigation of *how* and *why* Western painting has traditionally worked, specifically of how its system of representation has been culturally mediated, strongly disallows the assertion above by Thomas McEvilley that modernism in all its forms hegemonically privileges – *that is, naturalises* – Western art at the expense of non-Western art. (This latter point about avant-garde modernism as a critical engagement with Western hegemony, instead of being an uncritical presentation of it, was made by Meyer Schapiro in a series of classic essays from the 1930s up through the 1970s.)<sup>53</sup>

In fact, the Cubist contestation of Western cultural hegemony is precisely what allowed Diego Rivera (one of the greatest of the Cubist painters) to recruit Cubist collage and modernist space on behalf of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, with its unequivocal commitment to constructing a non-Eurocentric national identity. There are two key works in this regard by Rivera that fuse

51 For a discussion of Bakhtin on this, see Chapter 13 of this book (Craven, 'Clement Greenberg and the "Triumph" of Western Art').

52 Krauss 1985, pp. 23–41.

53 See, for example, both Meyer Schapiro 'The Nature of Abstract Art' [1957] and 'Recent Abstract Painting' [1957] in Schapiro 1978, pp. 185–227.



the shifting planes of Cubism with the forces of revolutionary upheaval. These are his *Portrait of Martín Luís Guzmán* (1915) and his *Zapatista Landscape: The Guerrilla*, which was painted in 1915 after Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa had taken and briefly occupied the capital of Mexico City. (In fact, Guzmán, a Mexican novelist, did serve at one point with Villa.)<sup>54</sup>

A rival and generally unrelated movement that used modernist collage to quite different ends but for very critical reasons nonetheless was Surrealism, which numbered among its ranks at various points such major Latin American artists as Wifredo Lam, Frida Kahlo and Roberto Matta.<sup>55</sup> And, of course, no other avant-garde movement contributed more to the emergence of anti-colonialist discourse or to the course of multi-ethnic identity in the arts than did the Surrealists.<sup>56</sup> In 1943, André Breton called Aimé Césaire's damning indictment of European colonialism and Western racism, in *Cahier d'un retour pays natal* (Return to my Native Land), 'nothing less than the greatest lyrical monument of our times'.<sup>57</sup> Picasso, who was also deeply moved by this Martinique poet's work, illustrated Césaire's fourth book, *Corps perdu*, in 1950.

While in Haiti during 1945, Breton declared the following to the poets of this Caribbean country:

Surrealism is allied with the peoples of color, first because it has sided with them against all forms of imperialism and white brigandage ... and secondly because of the profound affinities between Surrealism and 'primitive' thought ... It is therefore no accident, but a *sign of the times*, that the greatest impulses towards new paths for Surrealism have been furnished ... by my greatest friends of color – Aimé Césaire in poetry and Wifredo Lam in painting.<sup>58</sup>

As James Clifford has pointed out in his exemplary discussion of 'Ethnographic Surrealism', the Surrealist aesthetic was still in keeping, in several important respects, with what we have seen to be the most fundamental characteristics of Rubén Darío's original conception of modernism, for they valued fragments, curious combinations and unexpected juxtapositions that were drawn from the domains of the erotic, the alien, the pre-colonial and the repressed. Further-

54 For a survey of the two hundred Cubist paintings executed by Rivera between 1913 and 1917, see *Diego Rivera: The Cubist Years*, Phoenix Art Museum, 1984, pp. 104–9.

55 Baddeley and Fraser 1989, p. 102.

56 Ibid.

57 Breton 1978 [1943], p. 232.

58 Breton, 1978 [1945], p. 256 and p. 259.

more, the progressive part of the Surrealist trajectory generally operated along a track that Clifford has identified as follows:

Unlike the exoticism of the nineteenth century, which departed from a more-or-less confident cultural order in search of a temporary *frisson*, a circumscribed experience of the bizarre, modern surrealism and ethnography began with reality deeply in question ... [T]he 'primitive' societies of the planet were increasingly available as aesthetic, cosmological, and scientific resources. These possibilities drew on something more than an older orientalism; they required modern ethnography ... For every local custom or [national] truth there was always an exotic alternative, a possible juxtaposition or incongruity ... And it is important to understand their way of taking culture seriously, as a contested reality – a way that included the ridiculing and reshuffling of its orders ... Another outgrowth of ethnographic surrealism ... is its connection with Third World modernism and nascent anti-colonialism.<sup>59</sup>

### Conclusion

A task not only of Darío's original concept of modernism as it has been developed and even transformed through these subsequent movements, but also of critical theory in the tradition of Marx, Benjamin and Adorno, was precisely to salvage for progressive purposes whatever was still viable and valuable in the various class and ethnic legacies to which we are all heirs. Bertolt Brecht's advice of '[u]se what you can', carried with it the implicit corollary that what turns out to be reactionary in such lineages should be discarded without nostalgia. One such concept that in some, but not all respects, remains valuable and emancipatory is *modernism*, or at least 'alternative modernism'. For, as Terry Eagleton has rightly declared, '[i]t is left moralism, not historical materialism, which having established the bourgeois provenance of a particular concept, practice, or institution, then, disowns it in an excess of ideological purity'.<sup>60</sup>

In fact, from the *Communist Manifesto* onwards, Marx never ceased to sing the praises of the progressive aspects of bourgeois society and of capitalism, even as he relentlessly criticised all the reactionary features of both throughout the same period. (Thus, to say simply that Marx was opposed to capitalist mod-

59 Clifford 1988, p. 120.

60 Eagleton 1990, pp. 8–9.

ernisation and the bourgeoisie is off the mark. Rather, *he was both for and against each*). Nothing attests more to his multi-lateral approach to society than Marx's definition of socialism as the unrealised potential inherent to capitalism – a potential that capitalism alone brought into being historically but which ironically enough capitalism itself can neither consolidate nor greatly extend because of its own structural contradictions. Revealingly, Marx's profound ambivalence about capitalism finds a telling analogue in the deep ambivalence of the best alternative modernist artists towards both modernity and modernisation, especially in the Third World. *The partially admiring characterisation by Marx in 1848 of capitalist modernisation as a process in which 'all that's solid melts into air' was a telling correlative for Baudelaire's 1863 definition of the historical experience of modernity as 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, and the contingent'*.<sup>61</sup>

In order to sum up this discussion of the progressive legacy of modernism, it would be very instructive to return briefly to the same country in which the term modernism originated, namely Nicaragua, to see how the lineage of Rubén Darío and *modernism* have fared in the last two decades. If we examine some of the notable artworks produced by the Sandinista Revolution of 1979–89, we shall see artworks that are anti-imperialist and non-Eurocentric (but *not* anti-Western); artworks that are richly multicultural *and* that are unquestionably linked to modernism. One such work is Santos Medina's painting of 1982 entitled *La unidad revolucionaria de los Indoamericanos*, which is located quite justifiably within the tradition of Rubén Darío's *modernismo*. This painting combines intentional references to pre-Columbian ceramics, such as Nicoya ware, with allusions to European Cubism and an oblique recollection of Diego Rivera's contribution to modernism via 'Anáhuac Cubism'.<sup>62</sup> In this situation as in others, modernism is not simply a regressive remnant of the colonial past, but a still viable *modus operandi* as well as raw material for reconstructing a postcolonial present in keeping with a more egalitarian future.

In closing, I should probably note that one of the very first uses of the term 'post-modern' was by the historian Arnold Toynbee in a book entitled *A Study of History*, which was written in 1938 and published in 1947.<sup>63</sup> Significantly, for Toynbee the term 'post-modern' was a chronological one rather than a stylistic one and it denoted basically 'post-Eurocentric' and 'post-modernisation' along Western lines, or perhaps more accurately, 'post-colonial'. Such a usage

61 Baudelaire 1965 [1863].

62 For an extended discussion of these issues, see Craven, 1989: *The New Concept of Art and Popular Culture in Nicaragua Since the Revolution in 1979*.

63 Toynbee 1947. See also Jencks 1986, p. 2.

of 'postmodern' is definitely not at odds with the ongoing legacy of progressive, non-Eurocentric tendencies within modernism proper that I have outlined here. So, while there is indeed a sense in which we have entered a postmodern, postcolonial, and post-Western-centred period of history, there is another sense in which we still have yet to catch up with modernism.

## Post-Colonial Modernism in the Work of Diego Rivera and José Carlos Mariátegui

Several years ago, the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes was travelling through the countryside of Morelos, the home province of the legendary revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata. Fuentes and his companions became lost in this mountainous region with its maze of rice paddies and sugar-cane fields. When they finally came to a village, Fuentes asked an old peasant the community's name. The peasant from Morelos replied: 'Well, that depends. We call it Santa María in times of peace. We call it Zapata in times of war'.<sup>1</sup>

This encounter reminded Fuentes of something often lost sight of in the West. At any given moment, especially in Latin America, there is more than one concept of time in operation – and each of them is replete with its own distinctive historical and spatial coordinates. One of the first artworks to encapsulate this multilateral 'montage' of various temporal modes – which I refer to here as 'uneven development' – was a magisterial 1915 painting by Diego Rivera entitled *Paisaje Zapatista: El Guerrillero* (*Zapatista Landscape: The Guerrilla*), and this is a work to which we shall return shortly. Inspired as it was by the Mexican Revolution from 1910–20, this commanding artwork reminds us immediately of what Fuentes has recently noted in *Nuevo Tiempo Mexicano* (*New Time in Mexico*) from 1994, namely, 'Only the Revolution made present all of Mexico's pasts [with equal force] – and this is why it deserves a capital R'.<sup>2</sup>

Another encounter also made evident the distinctive set of historical convergences that were occurring in the 1920s not only in Mexico, but throughout the hemisphere as well. This interchange is represented by a little known but quite important portrait photo of Diego Rivera that was autographed by the Mexican artist and mailed to the editorial staff of a remarkable Peruvian journal, *Amauta*, to which it was also dedicated in 1926. The Rivera photograph was then published in the fifth issue, in January 1927, of this vanguard journal, which lasted from 1926 to 1930. It was founded as well as directed throughout its entire existence by the philosopher José Carlos Mariátegui, who is as important to Latin American thought as Diego Rivera is to the art of the Ameri-

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1 Fuentes 1981, p. 61.

2 Fuentes 1996, p. 18.

cas.<sup>3</sup> There was more than an elective affinity linking them, since, as we shall see, their mutual admiration was firmly grounded in a comparable analysis of society that drew them to each other.

Their similarly heterodox views of socialism, in tandem with an alternative concept of *indigenismo*, caused both of them to be denounced as ultra-leftists and populists by the orthodox leaders of the Communist Party and Comintern in these years.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the terms of their agreement politically also account for their almost equal distance from the centrist politics of José Vasconcelos, the one-time patron of Rivera's murals in Mexico. Vasconcelos was someone with whom Mariátegui remained in contact even though Mariátegui criticised the ethnocentrism of the Mexican philosopher's particular concept of *mezclaje* (or ethnic fusion), as well as its concomitant and quite condescending view of pre-colonial culture in the Americas.<sup>5</sup>

Before returning to Diego Rivera's overlooked photographic tribute to Mariátegui and *Amauta* (which was reciprocated textually by *Amauta*), I should outline briefly the theoretical point of departure that will lead to a far more emphatic linkage of the art and thought of Rivera and Mariátegui than has so far been realised in the Diego Rivera literature. Even the wonderfully comprehensive catalogue and chronology put out by scholars at the Detroit Institute of Arts in 1986 overlooked this significant, indeed, signal relationship between Rivera and Mariátegui. Not surprisingly, then, the most recent biography of Rivera – by Patrick Marnham in 1998 – does not even mention Mariátegui, much less his noteworthy relationship with Rivera that I shall explore.

As the contemporary Mexican philosopher Alberto Híjar has convincingly argued, the visual result of Rivera's work from this period was a form of dissident or alternative *indigenismo*. This was particularly the case with Rivera's brilliant mural cycle for the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (the Ministry of Education) – nine panels of which appeared in black and white reproductions for *Amauta* in 1926–7, when it also published two articles about Rivera, and in 1929 *Amauta* even featured a drawing by Rivera on its front cover.<sup>6</sup>

3 Sánchez Vázquez 1990, pp. 3–14; and Unruh 1989, pp. 45–69.

4 Miroshesky 1973, p. 6; and Craven 1997, pp. 93–9.

5 Mariátegui 1988 [1928], pp. 130–1. Both Néstor García Canclini and Gerardo Mosquera later agreed with Mariátegui's criticisms of Vasconcelos.

6 Híjar 1986, pp. 37–72.

### An Alternative Concept of Hybridity

Contrary to the 'classless' ideals of ethnic unity, and even the melting pot ethnicity crucial for the official Mexican discussions of *mestizaje*, such as those found so famously in the writings of philosopher José Vasconcelos and anthropologist Manuel Gamio from 1916 through 1926, there is a notably divergent position in the artworks and writings of Diego Rivera, as well as in the contemporary essays by José Carlos Mariátegui. In the telling words of Híjar, the hegemonic *indigenismo* in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America – which was an objective correlative for Vasconcelos's concept of *mestizaje* (or hybridity) and the so-called '*raza cósmica*' – presupposed a resolutely essentialist notion of race, a Rousseauian paternalism towards Native American culture, a stridently anti-Marxist conception of society, a strictly evolutionary as well as quite linear view of historical development, and an economistic concept of progress that was entirely in keeping with the mainstream Western ideology of modernisation, however much Vasconcelos is often seen as having arrived at an alternative to it.<sup>7</sup>

None of these various positions can be found, however, in a sustained way in the pictorial logic of Diego Rivera's *indigenista* paintings – nor in the analytical essays by José Carlos Mariátegui on the 'Indian problem' as it is labelled in his now classic text *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* from 1928. (It is this text more than any other that has caused Mariátegui to be considered the 'Antonio Gramsci of Latin America'.)<sup>8</sup>

Just as Vasconcelos would erroneously criticise Rivera in the late 1920s for being 'anti-Spanish' (or anti-European actually), so Mariátegui would simultaneously praise Rivera in his private correspondence as 'one of us' and publicly take Vasconcelos to task in *Siete ensayos* as follows (undoubtedly along lines that Rivera would have embraced): 'Vasconcelos, who tends to depreciate the native cultures of America, thinks that without a supreme law [underlying their state formations] they were condemned to disappear because of their innate inferiority ... [Yet] Inca culture ... has left us a magnificent popular art ... [and] social and political organization all the more remarkable'.<sup>9</sup>

But before we go any further, let me change course for a moment and indicate the route that the rest of this article will take. *First*, I need to affirm that *images always come before words* and are never simply reducible to them.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Löwy 1998, pp. 76–88.

<sup>9</sup> Mariátegui 1988 [1928], pp. 130–1.

*Second*, I must emphasise that important art – such as that of Diego Rivera – creates theory, without ever simply illustrating or mechanically reflecting theory.<sup>10</sup> In short, I shall first focus in a concerted way on the art object – and its internal pictorial logic – before trying to extract theoretical projects from it, whether those of Mariátegui or anyone else. Thus, the first half of this paper addresses some of the attributes that cause Diego Rivera's pictorial rendition of *indigenista* values to be far more innovative and still timely, than do, say, the contemporary *indigenista* paintings from Mexico of Fernando Leal or the subsequent work of Francisco Zúñiga from Costa Rica – and even perhaps the contemporary images of José Sabogal from Peru. Then I will refocus in the latter part of this paper on the theoretical conclusions that one can develop out of the prior and overdetermined paintings of Diego Rivera.

### Rivera's Zapatista Landscape and Uneven Pictorial Development

Among the first major artworks to operate by means of a heightened sense of temporal hybridity, thus being a 'collage' of different historical modes and historic moments (if not of various materials), was a splendid 1915 painting by Diego Rivera. This image epitomised a non-Eurocentric tendency within Europe's symbolic cultural centre, namely, the Parisian artworld where Rivera painted it. Entitled *Paisaje Zapatista: El Guerrillero*, this large painting now enjoys pride of place in the National Museum of Mexico. At first it appears to be a collage, since it features a virtuoso treatment of materials that trick the spectator into thinking that these things have been physically appended to the canvas, although they in fact have not. Here Rivera's 'pure' oil painting on canvas trumps and ironically inverts the 'impure' logic of the actual Cubist collage, with its mixture of various media. Moreover, this irreverent painting triggered a major controversy in the Cubist enclave of Paris and apparently caused poet Pierre Reverdy and Max Jacob to deride Rivera in quite ethnocentric terms as a 'Courbet of the savannahs' – as if any place in Latin America could

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10 I realise, of course, this is not a popular view at a time when the 'right' quotation from Foucault or Baudrillard supposedly exhausts what we can say about an object. Yet anyone who has ever read Foucault on *Las Meninas* knows how much more is still left to be said, and how little this French author actually did say, about an artwork that ultimately attests to his own highly limited, if also very intelligent and quite resourceful, epistemic purview. On Foucault's unabashed Eurocentrism, see Said 1984, p. 22, and on his theoretical writings see Dews 1984, pp. 72–95.



simply be described in ways normally reserved for sub-Saharan Africa colonies *within the French empire*.<sup>11</sup>

Labelled by Mexican art historian Justino Fernández as a paradigmatic example of '*Anáhuac Cubism*' ('*Anáhuac*' was the Aztec's name for the Valley of Mexico), this pictorial *tour de force* also contains a hybrid element in the form of the *trompe l'oeil* depiction of the paper in the right foreground. The latter conjures up recollections of Spanish colonial images of the Baroque period, such as those done by Francisco Zurbarán (whose work was often shipped to the New World in the seventeenth century). Moreover, this image also leaps forward in time to harbour a reference to a famous photo of Zapata (whether by Hugo Brehme or Victor-Augustin Casasola) – which was then widely circulated by means of mechanical reproduction over the international wire services.<sup>12</sup>

However, as it is more agrarian in feel than either pastoral or bucolic in character (to think of landscape paintings by European Cubists and Fauvists), this painting by Rivera – which we could label a type of *agrarian Cubism* in homage to the distinctive political project of Zapata – elicits through its crystalline setting a more topical allusion both geographically and historically to '*la región más transparente del aire*', as author Alfonso Reyes would call the Valley of Mexico in his 1915 novel entitled, appropriately, *Visión de Anáhuac*. (Like Mexican novelist Martín Luis Guzmán, a one-time secretary of Pancho Villa, Alfonso Reyes was a friend of Rivera in this period. And, of course, Rivera executed a well-known Cubist portrait of Guzmán in 1915.)<sup>13</sup> Among the notably innovative things about this hybrid example of *Anáhuac Cubism* by Rivera is its distinctive type of conjunctural modernism that reminds us so well of Dore Ashton's astute observation that early modernism at its best possessed a multilateral trajectory that shifted about in dynamic fashion, *moving both forward to the past and back to the future simultaneously*.<sup>14</sup> What results visually and otherwise is not a melted-down mixture or monolithic *mestizaje*, but rather

11 Craven 1997, pp. 34–5.

12 Downs 1999, pp. 100–1. As Downs notes: 'Rivera had first seen the image of a revolutionary soldier on a postcard sent to him by a friend in Mexico'. Moreover, she points out that the *sarape*, from Saltillo in the North, could signify Pancho Villa, but that the wide-brimmed felt hat and the distinctive pose with the rifle actually derived from a famous photo of Zapata, from the South, which Rivera had seen. A corresponding iconographic reading can be found in Favela 1984, pp. 106–7.

13 Favela 1984, p. 104.

14 Dore Ashton, 'Speculations on Modernism', Museum of Fine Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico (public lecture given on April 15, 1994).

a glittering multi-ethnic mosaic of cross-cultural references and syncopated fragments. They no more allow a mere return to roots, than they permit closure at any one moment in time, but at most only the montage of different temporal modes. As such, Rivera's painting is an early, perhaps the earliest, example of what is now known as 'postcolonial art' because of the way it hinges on a darting interplay, which is both multi-class-based and multi-ethnic in nature. Unlike the other and more binary tradition of *anti-colonial art*, the *postcolonial work* of Rivera showcases an unsettled interchange of the urban and the rural, of the centre and the periphery, of the mass produced and the artisanal, of illusionary mass and modernist flatness. The Rivera image thus embodies the ebb and flow of postcolonial art as it has only been recently defined in a major study: 'By the term "postcolonial" we do not imply an automatic, or seamless and unchanging process of resistance, but a series of [critical] linkages ... and critiques of imperial representation.'<sup>15</sup>

What emerges from this inaugural 'postcolonial' modernist painting by Diego Rivera (and Desmond Rochfort has rightly called him the first great 'post-colonial' artist, not just anti-colonial painter) is a complex, and open-ended to-and-fro, with all sorts of lessons and concretising components in a variety of directions. This is a radically new image and one notably at odds with the more static and one-dimensional frieze of 'heroic' revolutionary cadres that one sees in the contemporary 'anti-colonial' art of painters like Fernando Leal. Such is the case with the latter's popular and very illustrative 1921 oil painting entitled *Zapatistas at Rest* (a favourite of Vasconcelos). In Rivera's alternative modernist painting, historical narrativity emerges *in medias res* as a delta-like expanse of competing stories. Conversely, in Leal's realist image history is simply a highway going in one direction with unpaved and soon superseded peasant paths denoting its singular story-line, its allegiance to conventional concepts of development.

Look, for example, at Fernando Leal's sentiment-laden 1920 work *Indian with a Red Sarape*. Less an active engagement with historical change than a passive snapshot of an essentialising image that purportedly encapsulates the 'timeless' and indigenous roots of Mexico, this painting by Leal is not about *critical hybridity* nor is it about the alternative and transformative *indigenismo* of Rivera's work. In the latter work everything offers us competing visual choices and nothing centres the painting (as does the main motif) or commands our attention so *exclusively* (as does the marvelous red sarape in Leal's paradoxical painting). At one and the same time, the Leal image would have us concentrate

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15 Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1995, p. 3.

on a return to 'purely' indigenous form – and yet it attempts to do so by means of a technique, language, media, and conventions, which are overwhelmingly those of official Europe and its imperial identity.

Nor is it by chance, for our purposes, that Rivera's collage, or impure hybrid, which is not just anti-European in texture, would nevertheless later allow him to claim of *Zapatista Landscape* that it was a postcolonial artwork. It had vanquished his 'Mexican-American inferiority complex' and his uncritical 'awe before historic Europe and its culture'.<sup>16</sup> In this work, *which is both Western and non-Western at once*, we see white shadows, or spectres, that are as palpable as the fragments of reality that they shadow. Similarly, in the first issue of *Amauta* (a word which comes from Qucchua and means 'wiseman' or 'teacher'), Mariátegui referred to this journal of 'vanguard artists, socialists, and revolutionaries', as an apparition or spectre that haunted the status quo in Peru.<sup>17</sup>

A deftly calibrated balancing act of the declarative and the indirect, Rivera's *Zapatista Landscape* is at once formally dense and compositionally dispersed. The almost camouflaged image of the figure in the painting forces the viewer to search for shifting pictorial traces, thus eliciting an analogy between Cubist clues and a guerrilla's elusiveness – someone who is here one moment and gone the next, *like the vision of a spectre*. Using brash but 'authentic' colours for the peasant pancho, or *campesino sarape*, this painting by Rivera both refers to the familiar and transfigures it, so as to evade easy recognition and *defer final identity*. In this regard, as in others, Rivera contradicts the fixed and essentialising contemporary discourses of Vasconcelos and Gamio, as well as of Fernando Leal. For the latter three figures the indigenous is conclusively recognised and is *only* of the past, where it is simply a rustic prologue to the present. According to this hegemonic view in the 1920s, *indigenismo* was merely an identity already established that awaited its illustrator, or perhaps its mortician, and certainly called for a pictorial archaeologist – not a *bricoleur*, or *bricollagist*, like Rivera.

The pictorial logic of the visual language used by Rivera, though, entailed an affirmation and expansion of oil painting's communicative resources, then negation and contraction of the aesthetic claims on behalf of Western European art. This happens, for example, through the abbreviated use of chiaroscuro, the coy and inconsistent usage of overlapping planes, and the fleeting figurative references that flirt with illustrative forms, then leave them behind. Just how the highly original internal logic of Rivera's paintings related to the

16 March 1991 [1960], p. 31.

17 Mariátegui 1926, p. 1.

unique external developments of the Mexican Revolution was summed up well enough by the painter himself:

It [Cubism] was a revolutionary movement, questioning everything that had previously been said and done in art. It held nothing sacred. As the old world would soon blow itself apart, never to be the same again, so Cubism broke down forms as they had been seen for centuries, and was creating out of fragments new forms, new objects, new patterns, and – ultimately – new worlds.<sup>18</sup>

Nor did Rivera fail to consolidate the compelling image from 1915 that he presented to contemporaries in the middle of the Mexican Revolution. For, in the *Secretaría de Educación* frescoes that so attracted the attention of the editorial staff at *Amauta*, as well as in later mural cycles from 1940 and 1954, Rivera consolidated a conception of *alternative indigenismo* through a treatment of uneven historical development that placed him at the forefront of all those who sought to arrive at a radical but still plausible framework for social transformation. Not surprisingly, these works in the Ministry of Education earned both the animosity of Vasconcelos and the admiration of Mariátegui.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, he did so throughout the rest of his career with the renovative possibilities of Cubism ever most at hand. In a certain sense, then, Rivera never really abandoned Cubism. Instead, he simply pulled back from what José Ortega y Gasset termed the ‘fury of plastic geometrism’ that largely dissolved everything into abstract structures. Since historical narrativity as part of his epic modernism was always symptomatic of his mature work, Cubism as a pictorial idiom and syntactical strategy underpinned the structural logic of his presentation of history, even as the otherwise dispersive logic of Cubism meant that many different historical routes remained open. In this regard, Rivera always conjured up a heterodox use of Cubism against the orthodox Cubists, which was the source of his controversy with the Cubist circle in the teens.<sup>20</sup>

On the second and third levels of the Court of Labour in the Ministry, for example, scenes of modern Western science, as in the personification for *Chemistry*, are balanced with scenes from ancient pre-Columbian thought, as in the figure for *Geology*. The spectator is thus denied a one-dimensional overview of the history of science, which would have us simply march in

18 March 1991, p. 58; for more on ‘alternative modernism’ see Craven 1997, pp. 42–56.

19 For Vasconcelos’ criticisms of Rivera as ‘anti-Spanish’, see Vasconcelos 1986, pp. 227–8.

20 For more on this, see: Craven 1997, pp. 33–5.

single file from purely non-Western superstition to the radiant enlightenment of 'pure' Western science. Rather, there is a more complex sense of modern science as the collective, but still incomplete, achievement throughout history of both non-European and European cultures, neither to the exclusion of the other, as part of a broader process of uneven historical development. Similarly, and to greater effect, Rivera painted in 1953 a striking mural for the Hospital de la Raza in Mexico City, entitled *The History of Medicine in Mexico: The People Demand Better Health*. This work is a coda to an entire postcolonial visual tradition in his work.

In the latter mural, we see Rivera balancing the achievements of pre-Columbian medicinal culture and art forms with the accomplishments of modern science and post-Renaissance art from the West, neither to the exclusion of the other and with a radically democratic political twist that demands unprecedented popular access to both. The visual language is a commanding and cohesively hybrid embodiment of pre-Columbian figures, such as *Tlazolteotl* and *Izcuitl*, interwoven with Renaissance-Baroque conventions for evoking realist forms. All of it is within a gridded structural framework that takes *Anáhuac Cubism* to another plane entirely. Similarly, part of this fresco is a visual repository of the ancient homeopathic practices and herbal cures of the precolonial periods and the other is a showcase of modern surgical practices from Western science. A very complex situation thus emerges in which the present has lessons to teach the past, but it is also one in which the past still has lessons to teach the present, along with the future. To be of the past, Rivera's mural shows, is not simply to be historically superseded in all respects. For there are senses, in which the past is the past – but there are other senses in which the past is not simply of the past, but also of the future.<sup>21</sup>

### Mariátegui and 'Indigenous' Socialism in Peru

To approach the problem of land reform in Rivera's murals, as in the Ministry of Education, is to approximate even more clearly the related and equally heterodox political vision of José Carlos Mariátegui, particularly as articulated in his *Siete ensayos* and in *Amauta*. It is also to understand quite profoundly the gap that separates both of these still germane figures from the more anachronistic thought of Vasconcelos and Gamio (however important the latter two thinkers undoubtedly were to the 1920s). But, at issue here is not only one's significance

21 For a classic overview of Rivera along these lines, see Fernández 1994, p. 44.

to the 1920s, but also to the 1990s and beyond. Here, both Rivera and Mariátegui carry the day handsomely, and evidently in terms we can now rightly call 'post-colonial' in the most insightful sense.

Before discussing the presentation of Rivera's art by *Amauta* to the Peruvian public between 1926 and 1929, I should perhaps introduce José Carlos Mariátegui more formally and outline his innovative, even brilliant, response to the issues of *indigenismo*, class-based inequities, avant-garde art, and the relation of Native American economic formations to the contemporary problem of land reform. In his surprisingly short but remarkably accomplished life from 1894 to 1930, Mariátegui began as a journalist, developed into a poet and a political activist, and emerged as one of the foremost political theorists from the Americas in the first half of the twentieth century. Along the way, he managed to write one of the more astute critical assessments of avant-garde art from the left of the political spectrum, which allowed ample space for engaging with the diverse artistic practices to which he was most allied – from Diego Rivera and José Sabogal through Dada and Surrealism.<sup>22</sup> In addition, he was also originally a key supporter of the *Alianza Popular Revolucionaria de las Americas* (APRA), an anti-imperialist movement. Then, in fairly rapid succession, he founded first *Amauta* in 1926 and the Socialist Party of Peru in 1928.

At a point when, in official circles, *indigenismo* merely meant that one fostered an appreciation of pre-Columbian culture, Mariátegui (like Rivera) gave a radical twist to this discussion through his insistence on the inseparable link between race and class, or, more precisely, between the division of labour and ethnic cultural traditions. Conversely, at a time when the Communist Party in Latin America, under the leadership of the Comintern, held an orthodox Marxist view, at once economic and covertly positivistic, of how *socialism must take the same path in every country*, Mariátegui took issue with this position and had the temerity to find an antecedent in the writings of Marx. In doing so, Mariátegui attacked the modern 'superstition of [uncritical] respect for the idea of progress' in Europe – both on the right and the left.<sup>23</sup>

It was Mariátegui's supposedly 'outrageous' precept that the Inca civilisation of pre-Conquest Peru, for all of its undeniable problems, still offered some historical lessons of striking significance to the socialist movement in Latin America. In rejecting outright the Stalinist position that Peru first had to go through capitalist development under the tutelage of the West before it could

<sup>22</sup> Mariátegui 1926b, pp. 3–4.

<sup>23</sup> Mariátegui 1996 [1925], p. 349.

gain its national independence, Mariátegui followed up the work of the Central European philosopher Rosa Luxemburg. She had earlier praised the economic formations of the Inca as examples of so-called 'primitive agrarian communism'.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, Mariátegui's hybrid project in response to uneven historical development meant that one could combine the popular communal configurations of the Incas (even though they occurred within an authoritarian political system that must be rejected) *with* an insistence on the modern civil liberties insured by liberalism (even though they have often assumed prominence within the modern capitalism of which Mariátegui was deeply critical). Accordingly, his political and economic montage of different epochs in Peruvian history meant that he was able to avoid the evolutionist dogma of progress that was, oddly enough, common both to Vasconcelos and the Comintern, with their primarily linear and quite punctual conceptions of controlled development. More surprisingly, perhaps, he was able to reject in consistent theoretical terms the backward-looking illusionism of return-to-roots *indigenismo*, found in the likes of Leal's artworks. As Mariátegui emphasised, his view about reclaiming certain aspects of pre-colonial culture 'in no way signifies a romantic and anti-historical tendency toward the reconstruction or resurrection of Inca socialism, which corresponded to historical conditions that have been completely superseded, and of which those habits of cooperation and socialism among the peasants remain a factor'.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps Mariátegui's most audacious and equally heretical proposal was developed at this irregular intersection when he emphasised that the democratic, communist and proto-socialist afterlife of formations among indigenous people in the highlands of Peru would provide the fundamental starting point for social transformation in the present. Thus for him, Peruvian socialism would be both national and international, both Western and non-Western, both future oriented and backward-looking all at once. In *Amauta* in 1928, he put this peculiarly amphibian and historically ambidextrous conception of socialism and democracy into motion. On the one hand, Mariátegui maintained, 'Socialism is certainly *not* an Indo-American theory ... And socialism, although born in Europe as was capitalism, is neither specifically nor particularly European. It is a worldwide movement'.<sup>26</sup>

But, on the other hand, Mariátegui insisted that:

24 Luxemburg, 1975 [1925], p. 658. See also Löwy 1998, p. 83.

25 Mariátegui 1996 [1928], p. 92.

26 Mariátegui 1928, p. 3.

Socialism is ultimately in the American tradition. Incan civilisation was the most advanced primitive communalist organisation that history has yet known. We certainly do not wish to claim that socialism in the Americas will copy this tradition. It must be a heroic new creation. Yet, we must also give life to an Indoamerican socialism reflecting our own language. This mission is worthy of a whole new generation.<sup>27</sup>

For this reason and others, one can understand why recent historians of Latin American thought would claim the following of Mariátegui's legacy.<sup>28</sup> His resourceful analysis demonstrated how the integration of the indigenous population into this struggle for democratic rights, both economically and politically, will be essential to any process of development with equity in Peru – and indeed elsewhere in Latin America. More broadly, though, the theoretical novelty and historical acuity of Mariátegui's work help us to understand why his writings would have been so highly valued by Che Guevara in the 1960s and by the Sandinistas in the 1980s.<sup>29</sup>

### Rivera According to *Amauta*

The inaugural article about Diego Rivera was a one-page chronology by the artist himself for issue number four in December 1926. This '*Biografía sumaria*', we are told by Mariátegui himself, was compiled and edited by the artist himself ('*han sido ordenados y redactados por el propio artista*'). The page on which it appears (p. 5) is accompanied by two reproductions – an academic drawing of Rivera by an artist named Builen and a rapid caricature of Rivera by the Mexican satirist Miguel Covarrubias. The first shows the Mexican muralist soberly looking upward with a visionary, if troubled gaze, while the second features a lively as well as irreverent look at Rivera's comical visage.

From the standpoint of self-revelation, this annotated life by the artist is highly instructive because of the way in which he quite soberly refers to landmark moments in his own development. To quote Rivera's rather modest assessment, it was in 1921 while he was doing drawings in the Yucatán and

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> On the importance of Mariátegui (and Gramsci) for the Cuban and Nicaraguan Revolutions, see Hodges 1986, pp. 179–84.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. In fact, my first sustained encounter with Mariátegui's ideas came from several visits to Nicaragua and Cuba during the 1980s. In each place, his work triggered some important discussions about the nature of development and 'appropriate technology'.



Puebla that '*Aparece al fin la personalidad del pintor*'. Nonetheless, he is sharply critical of the subsequent mural in 1922 for the National Preparatory School, which he considers unsuccessful. The reasons are telling: '*No logra una obra autónoma y las influencias de Italia son extremadamente visibles*' (He does not achieve an autonomous work, and the Italian influences are extremely obvious). By his own account, and here I think most scholars are in complete agreement with him, it was in the magisterial murals from 1923–6 in the Ministry of Education and in the National Autonomous University of Chapingo where '*poco a poco se desprende de las influencias y extiende su personalidad*' (little by little he leaves his influences behind and develops his own personality).<sup>30</sup>

Nor can there be any doubt but that Mariátegui agreed with this judgement, since of the fifteen works by Rivera reproduced in *Amauta*, no less than nine were from the Ministry of Education, which is a choice that also makes sense in terms of the local ideological project of both Mariátegui and of the journal *Amauta*, which, as noted above, means 'teacher'. Overall, this unusually large number of reproductions of works by Rivera in *Amauta* means that the Mexican artist had the second largest number of works in this publication of all the artists who were featured in its pages. Only the Peruvian *indigenista* painter José Sabogal, who designed the original cover of the journal and had more than thirty-four illustrations in it, surpassed Rivera in terms of absolute numbers. Among the artists who had fewer works showcased were Matisse, Picasso, George Grosz, Carlos Mérida, and Emilio Pettoruti.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Rivera murals from the Ministry of Education were ones that addressed many of the same themes that were handled with such acuity in Mariátegui's *Siete ensayos*, namely: (1) class-based inequities as a motor of historical change, (2) indigenous traditions as a means of constructing a new trans-regional social bond within disruptive circumstances, and (3) the fundamental role of militant teachers as 'organic intellectuals' not only for spreading literacy, but also for mobilising the popular classes – as, for example, was the case with Otilio Montaña, the schoolteacher from Morelos who helped Zapata draft the 1911 *Plan de Ayala*.

Moreover, the way that Rivera's work is conceptually framed in *Amauta* is doubly revealing for reasons that are threefold. First, his work is seen as exemplary of '*un movimiento*' in the arts and beyond that qualifies as avant-garde. As Renato Poggioli has noted, avant-garde art is advanced by a movement, rather than by a mere school in the conventional sense. Such art goes beyond the limits of artistic values per se in order to create a more comprehensive *Weltan-*

30 N.A. 1926, p. 5.

*schauung*, or worldview.<sup>31</sup> Such a formulation of the role of modern art so as to encompass *engagé* artists like Rivera was articulated both in Mariátegui's general 1926 '*Presentación de Amauta*' in Issue No. 1 cited above and even more brilliantly in his justifiably famous essay in No. 3 from the same year: 'Arte, Revolución y Decadencia'. Accordingly, the first piece on Rivera, in No. 4, 1926, was presented in conjunction with an essay by the Peruvian author and labour activist Haya de la Torre entitled, appropriately enough, '*Nuestro Frente Intelectual*', which was illustrated by two of Rivera's frescoes from the Ministry of Education.

Second, Rivera's avant-garde art is presented here in organic relation to vanguard politics, specifically as a beachhead for working-class mobilisation on the left of the political spectrum. Consistent with this view, the article and interview with Rivera by Esteban Pavletich, which is accompanied by the aforementioned photo of Rivera signed '*Para Amauta*' by the artist himself, is entitled '*Diego Rivera: el artista de una clase*' (Diego Rivera, painter of a social class).

Among the points made by the author are that Rivera is '*el pintor de una clase universal*' (painter of a universal class) and that '*Rivera, no. es un creador ... es el receptor substantivo surgido del seno de una porción social en el instante culminante de su historia*' (Rivera is not a creator ... he is a receptor born amidst a specific social class at a historical crux in time). Moreover, Rivera is characterised as '*un combatiente de vanguardia*' (a fighter of the avant-garde), who is committed to nothing less than the conception and construction of the '*auténtico Hombre Nuevo*' (the authentic new man). Surprisingly enough, *since it has so far gone unincluded in the Rivera literature*, there is an interview with the artist in which he stakes out a theoretical position very much in keeping with that of Mariátegui and *Amauta*. These remarks include comments on the potential resources of Cubism for artists allied to a revolutionary movement, as well as on the role of an artist within a revolutionary movement and the ideological cohesiveness of a necessarily hybrid revolutionary art.

Here I quote from Rivera's interview with *Amauta's* staff:

[E]l pintor revolucionario no. se ridiculo y excelso creador de obras maestras, sino un combatiente de vanguardia ... *a veces puede ser un guerrillero* ... el artista será revolucionario o no sera ... sirve para que la obra arte positiva, es decir revolucionario ... En nuestro tiempo – como en todos los tiempos – es necesario que la pasión dominante coincida con la aspir-

31 Poggioli 1981 [1962], pp. 1–15 (Chapter One).

ación colectiva de las masas. (The revolutionary painter is not a ridiculous and honourable creator of master works of art but a fighter of the avant-garde ... *sometimes a guerilla fighter* ... the artist will be revolutionary or won't be ... it serves so that the work of art is positive, that is revolutionary ... In our time – as in all times – the dominant passion must coincide with the collective aspiration of the masses).<sup>32</sup>

From here, Rivera goes on to praise modernism generally and Cubism more specifically in terms of *their potential*, but not always their actuality (and here again Rivera is in accord with Mariátegui's most famous line on this issue).<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, Rivera also criticises certain things about modernist art – most revealingly, its '*tendencia a la regresión arqueológica*'. The art of Fernando Leal stands accused on this score, at least implicitly. Significantly, one of Rivera's murals, with a critical or alternative *indigenista* logic, namely, his hybrid depiction of *Xochipili* in the stairway of the Ministry of Education, is used to provide a visual coda in Issue No. 4 for '*La Misión de Amauta*', the concluding section of Haya de la Torre's essay on the intellectual front embracing Rivera, Mariátegui, and the authors of *Amauta*. This work takes us full circle to the montage of temporal modalities introduced at the beginning. For, Rivera's mural features a work that combines Gauguin's pictorial innovations with a well-known Aztec sculpture, along with a use of space that is both Maya and Cubist in almost equal measure – so that it made manifest what Carlos Fuentes called at the outset un '*Nuevo Tiempo Mexicano*' in which the past and the present were reassembled pictorially to striking new effect. Yet this synthesis happened without ever leaving behind entirely some of the older and more insightful lessons to be taught by a deeply fragmented, yet still valuable, past.

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32 Pavletich 1927, pp. 8–9.

33 Pavletich 1927, p. 7.

## Realism Revisited and Re-Theorised in 'Pan-American' Terms

'Reality' television's staging of a numbing banality, endemic to the West in the early twenty-first century, has raised yet again the issue of 'realism' in the arts. This trendy if pedestrian TV genre produced by the corporate-backed 'culture industry' has arisen at a time when several scholars are revisiting the use of 'social realism' in the early twentieth century, as they look for realism's contemporary pertinence to critiques of corporate capitalism. What does 'realism' have to do with a reality at present mediated at every turn by forces that wish to direct, not simply reflect, everyday existence?

A notable shift in the domain of theory, after the feathery wave of 'postmodernism' has obviously crested, is the critical re-emergence of Georg Lukács's landmark discussion in the 1940s and 1950s of the crucial distinction between 'realism' and 'naturalism'. It is the latter naturalism tendency that is actually much closer to 'reality shows', whether on TV or in cyberspace, than is 'realism' as explicated by Lukács. Why? The 'realist' concentrates on what is 'typical' in society, so as to divulge symptomatic patterns of class-based hierarchies and how they are sustained by an inequitable economic base. Conversely, the 'naturalist' demotes all details of society to the same level of significance (or insignificance) on behalf of a 'cult of the average' that actually hides the uneven and hierarchical nature of society, and thus how it treats people unequally in economic and political terms. The latter is of course a type of right-wing populism that purports to treat 'everyone the same', in a society that does not.

Significantly, this comparative contrast by Lukács has more currency than his antiquated polemical one of 'realism *or* modernism', which suffers from a brittle binarism that lacks any broad exploratory insights. After all, 'realism', *pace* Lukács, from Courbet onwards was often a type of 'modernism', sometimes cosmopolitan, other times provincial and often compromised, but always with multiple strains, like modernisms in general. How, then, is Lukács's exposition of 'critical realism' as a counterweight to a resigned 'naturalism' still significant both for the renewed interest in 1930s 'social realism' and for the contemporary trend towards 'reality shows' in the mass media?

## I

Before briefly analysing here the strengths and weaknesses of a new book about 'social realism', *The Social and the Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere*,<sup>1</sup> I will recapitulate some of the key points registered about 'realism' by Lukács, perhaps its most commanding theorist in the twentieth century. We will then be in a better position to see how effective the book mentioned above has been in advancing our grasp of 'realism' from the 1930s onward.

For the Hungarian Marxist who wrote *Studies in European Realism* (1949), *Russian Realism & World Literature* (1949), *German Realists of the 19th Century* (1951) and *Balzac and French Realism* (1952), then finally his massive *Aesthetic: The Specificity of Aesthetics* of 1963, the key modern artists in the West are those who can aesthetically recreate a harmonious totality that represents the manifold richness of human existence on the other side of the alienating conditions caused by modern capitalism.<sup>2</sup> Society in the West, which is so deeply divided by the exclusionary logic of modernisation and the dislocating social experience of modernity, is tragically torn between the general and the particular (or between the social good and individual gain), as well as between the conceptual and the sensuous (that is, between a disembodied idealism and an orthodox empiricism in the guise of positivism). Thus, the 'realist' artist has a special charge. That charge is to reunify in art what is fragmented in modern society by means of a dialectical recovery of the complex totality, which places on trial the splintered existence enforced by the established order, to paraphrase Terry Eagleton.<sup>3</sup>

As such, Lukács's reading of realism as being predicated on societal 'typicality' is often a form of proto-structuralism, since it is not based on any theory of the 'great artist' propelling art history. What causes an artist to be important is not just personal skill but also his or her 'historical position' and class affiliation. Only in certain locations and at specific historical junctures would the producer of artworks be able to grasp, envision and represent 'the present as history' – or rather the present as a *prehistory* of a more egalitarian and non-exploitative future that will supersede the fragmentation of the present.

Not surprisingly, Lukács's greatest disciple, the Romanian critic Lucien Goldmann, was an avowed structuralist during the first wave of this 1960s movement in Paris. For Goldmann, realism is not about personal 'self-expression', but

1 Anreus, Linden and Weinberg 2006.

2 See also Lukács 1952, pp. 309–16.

3 Eagleton 1976, pp. 28–31.

rather a transpersonal representation of the 'structure of thought (or "world vision") of the social class' of the artist. Art works, he contends, are embodiments of 'trans-individual mental structures'. For Goldmann (and for Althusser, the teacher of Foucault), then, realism is not a dispersed reflection of reality, but instead an interventionary way of structuring artistically an ideologically framed but also materially based interpretation of reality, whether the artist was aware of this fact or not.<sup>4</sup> (Althusser's related phrasing of it was to talk of 'realist' art as articulating an 'internal distantiating'.)<sup>5</sup>

These key points regarding 'realism', according to Lukács and Goldmann, make clear that there is still merit to this position as a point of departure for contemporary debate. Nonetheless, there are manifest weaknesses in 'realism' as defined by the Lukács school that must be noted. As Eagleton rightly observes, the main critical terms deployed by Lukács for explicating 'realism' – 'totality', 'typicality', 'world-historical' – are more neo-Hegelian than Marxist and they implausibly presuppose a *symmetrical relation* between an artwork and a social class, as well as its ideology (as if there were only one to a class). According to this view, art and class (or art and the nation-state) are treated as mirror-like structural homologies for each other, without being able to deal either with the unevenness of historical development or the contradictory character of organic art within a fractured modern society that permits no aesthetic finality or conclusive harmony. To these criticisms of Lukács's famous theory of 'realism', several Latin American Marxists have made some incisive amplifications. Foremost among these Marxists thinkers from outside the West are José Carlos Mariátegui of Peru, Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez and Alberto Híjar of Mexico, in addition to the early writings of Cuba's Gerardo Mosquera.

In what remains one of the most influential books ever written about Marxism and art, namely *Las ideas estéticas de Marx* (1965) by Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, there is a deft assessment of the merits and demerits of Lukács. In this study, legendary throughout Latin America, Sánchez Vázquez observes that Lukács built the sturdiest case possible for treating art as a form of cognition only. Similarly, Lukács was deeply concerned with elevating 'realism' to a normative place in the arts. On both accounts, the very strength of his argument is also a telling disclosure of its weakness, since other dimensions of art, such as its perceptual and sensuous dimensions, are simply ignored. Furthermore, Sánchez Vázquez shows that there is nothing in the writings of Marx or Engels,

4 Goldmann 1955. For a comprehensive listing of Goldmann's writings, see the bibliography compiled for Telos Press by Ileana Rodríguez and Marc Zimmerman, in Goldmann 1976, pp. 148–75.

5 Althusser 1971 [1969], pp. 23–70.

or in the nature of language per se, that would sanction one language being the only way of addressing the issues supposedly engaged exclusively by 'realism'. Instead, Sánchez Vázquez convincingly shows that 'socialist pluralism' is more consistent with the Marxist tradition than any belief in a normative language in the arts. Yet this means that 'social realism' too has a place in this framework.<sup>6</sup>

In 1985, Mosquera seconded and advanced this critique of Lukács at nothing less than an International Lukács Conference in Havana paying tribute to the hundredth anniversary of the Hungarian thinker's birth, sponsored by the Cuban Communist Party. As Mosquera ironically observed of Lukács's model of 'realism', it was based exclusively on art and literature from the Western European tradition and it 'identified art with knowledge, that is, as a way of "thinking through images" whose content was in turn undifferentiated from that of science'.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, with Lukács and with Zhdanovism more generally, Mosquera noted, 'we are dealing with an aesthetic that privileges the literary', at the expense of the visual.<sup>8</sup> Mosquera then concluded:

Lukács' erudite ignorance marks his aesthetic with another fundamental trait that we can hardly accept, namely, his Eurocentrism ... We are faced with a systematic aesthetic [i.e., 'realism'] that has pretensions to universality while being entirely designed in accordance with the cultural foundation of the West ... What is certain in all this is that 'anti-modernist' Zhdanovism, ignorance of the visual arts, especially of modern art, and Eurocentrism are interconnected aspects. It is no coincidence that already in the 1920s, José Carlos Mariátegui, a Latin American Marxist, would suggest a new perspective on the theory of realism ... Zhdanovism precipitated its own death by not being concerned with enriching its own perspective on 'socialist realism' by, at the very least, incorporating an Orozco, a Rivera, a Pogolotti, or even a Picasso or a Léger ... In Latin America, dismissing modern art as 'anti-realist' is equivalent to negating the art that has helped us to realize ourselves historically ... and it is equal to denying some of the greatest achievements of Latin American culture.<sup>9</sup>

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6 Sánchez Vázquez 1973.

7 Mosquera 1986a, pp. 95–101.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

## II

A strength of the book *The Social and the Real* is the fact that its editors expressly attempt to rethink the category of 'realism' in post-Eurocentric terms, notwithstanding the understandably long shadow of Lukács in this theoretical circle. A related weakness of this book, though, is how most essays focusing on the North/South dialogue (four of the 14 in this collection) do not engage critically with such unavoidable thinkers as Sánchez Vázquez and Híjar, whether on the issue of 'social realism' or on that of such related themes as multiple types of *indigenismo* – a set of competing concepts here rendered in the reductive and surprisingly ethnocentric term of 'the native'.<sup>10</sup> This is hardly a locution that either Sánchez Vázquez or Híjar would ever accept, owing to its theoretical ethnocentrism and a revealing inaccuracy with regard to primary sources of the period.

Addressing art from Latin America in the 1930s, Alejandro Anreus succeeds in this regard and does so through his adroit use of José Carlos Mariátegui to locate the importance of the Argentinian painter Antonio Berni in internationalist terms. Anreus does not mention, though it is quite relevant here, that Mariátegui wrote a devastating critique of José Vasconcelos's misguided concept of 'indigenismo' – and that this critique by Mariátegui was embraced by Diego Rivera, as Híjar and others have pointed out.<sup>11</sup> Such an acknowledgement by this editor would have saved Mary K. Coffey from an obvious *misassumption* in her discussion of Vasconcelos and Rivera (a point to which I turn below). Some of the other authors contributing to this anthology also rather surprisingly stick with Eurocentric theoretical sources when they examine the issue of 'realism' in Latin America by means other than empirical analysis. The theoretical problems that arise ironically, if unintentionally, duplicate those noted above linked to Lukács (and Althusser or the early Foucault).

Significantly enough, editors Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden and Jonathan Weinberg say at the outset that this anthology of 14 essays is 'the first anthology to deal with ... [art] of the 1930s in a hemispheric context ... [and with the aim] of forging a Pan-American perspective on the art of the period'.<sup>12</sup> They then summarise their contribution as follows:

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10 Anreus, Linden and Weinberg 2006, p. xix and p. 44.

11 See the previous chapter of this book ('Postcolonial Modernism in the Work of Diego Rivera and José Carlos Mariátegui').

12 Anreus, Linden and Weinberg 2006, p. xiii.



Our focus on intrahemispheric exchange and artistic production is a break from the dominant modernist paradigm that sees art of the Americas as solely indebted and subservient to European art ... In sum, the art of the Western Hemisphere represents a dialogue between politics and art both within the Americas and European modernism and politics. However, in emphasizing Pan-Americanism, and in particular the extraordinary influence of the Mexican mural movement, we cannot ignore the economic, military, and cultural imperialism of the United States.<sup>13</sup>

This is an admirable editorial opening, at once scholarly and *engagé*, but the editors talk about the historiographic vagueness and imprecision of the term 'social realism' – which rather surprisingly we learn was not used much earlier than the 1970s to characterise the art of the 1930s. 'Realism' (or *réalisme*) as a term dates to at least 1836 in French art criticism, before it was boldly embraced in 1855 by Courbet in a manifesto concerning his retrospective exhibition from that year; 'socialist realism' dates from 1932 (when it was used for the first time in the Soviet journal *Literaturnaya Gazeta*) before being emphatically introduced as official policy by Andrei Zhdanov (on behalf of Stalin) in 1934 at a major congress on art and literature in the USSR.

The editors speculate that the term 'social realism' has 'some of the flavor of the ideals of the Popular Front'.<sup>14</sup> They note that, like the antifascist politics of the Popular Front with its generally ecumenical coalition of liberals and some leftists (excepting, of course, 'ultra-leftists': the Council Communists, the Trotskyists and Anarchists), 'social realism as a construct brings together a wide range of left-leaning artists regardless of their relationship to the Communist Party'.<sup>15</sup> This note of irresolution seems the right one on which to end the introduction, although they do underscore several very broad definitions of 'social realism', including most notably the perceptive claim by Patricia Hills that social realism is less a style than 'an attitude toward the role of art in life'.<sup>16</sup> In her case, as well as in some others, certain points of intersection with Lukács's conception of 'typicality' seem to be implied. A reason for leaving the term 'social realism' so underdetermined in the introduction is clearly the wish of the editors that the contributors to this volume help to construct a more extended definition of this key term. In that sense, their book is

13 Anreus, Linden and Weinberg 2006, p. xv.

14 Anreus, Linden and Weinberg 2006, p. xvii.

15 Ibid.

16 Anreus, Linden and Weinberg 2006, p. xvi.

commendably 'dialogic' in the tradition of Bakhtin, a Marxist dissident during the heyday of 'socialist realism'.

Several of the authors are definitely up to the challenge of grappling with this puzzle regarding the character of 'social realism' in fresh terms, while a few of them clearly are not.<sup>17</sup> Collectively they show, albeit in diverse ways, that 'social realism' cannot mean merely one strict visual language but rather a broad-ranging cluster of idioms in turn intertwined to varying degrees with less figurative modernist movements. Juan Martínez does indeed find a place in the 'social and the real' for Cuban artist Marcelo Pogolotti to recall the above challenge by Mosquera in the early 1980s, while Marilyn McKay does an excellent job of demonstrating how Canadian 'realism' of the 1930s was both linked to and yet divergent from Southern traditions in the hemisphere through its distinctive emotional restraint.

Jacqueline Francis follows up the above-noted critical engagements with Lukács by Latin American intellectuals when she deftly focuses on how African-American artists of the 1930s such as Malvin Gray Johnson and Earle W. Richardson had to address not only the category of 'typicality' but also the distressingly atypical conditions of ethnic minorities in the Depression Era of the US.<sup>18</sup> Painter Aaron Douglas is quoted in this respect as praising 'social realism' (or 'revolutionary art') in which he found 'the Negro sincerely represented', while also complaining that these same artistic images were nonetheless 'too frequently automatic ... vague and abstract'.<sup>19</sup> In a related essay Marlene Park discusses some searingly concrete representations of the atypicality of violence by the ultra-right visited on the African-American community, thus further connecting 'realism' to the tradition of 'social protest art' from the 1930s. In another essay in the same section, Jonathan Weinberg discloses the rather surprising undercurrents of homoeroticism in some 1930s 'social realism' and even 'socialist realism' at a time when even the US left was very homophobic (except for a few mavericks like Meyer Schapiro). Easily one of the best contributions in the entire anthology is by Anreus, whose discussion of the compelling artworks by Antonio Berni illuminates how this artist's vision of 'critical realism'

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17 Among the authors who tell us a considerable amount that is both new and convincing are Juan Martínez, Marilyn McKay, Jonathan Weinberg, Jacqueline Francis, Marlene Park, Natalie Lucky, Andrew Hemingway and Sally Stein. Essays by these seven contributors – along with an exemplary piece by Alejandro Anreus and a quite solid one by Diana Linden – all make good the wish to broaden and re-infect our sense of 'social realism'.

18 See also West 1993b, pp. 143–65. West wrote: 'Despite his incurable nostalgia ... Lukács remains the most provocative and profound Marxist thinker of this century'.

19 Anreus, Linden and Weinberg 2006, p. xx.

(a term used by Lukács at least by the early 1940s) was coupled with a heterodox Marxism from the Southern Cone countries. In this sense, Berni's artworks were heretical by the standards of the Communist Party.

Had the lead of Anreus – and of Martínez – been followed by Mary K. Coffey and Anthony Lee in terms of both primary research and theoretical resourcefulness, these latter two authors would perhaps not have failed to match the standards set by the former. What makes these essays by Coffey and Lee so disappointing is the fact that they are devoted to Mexican muralism, one of the galvanising forces of the entire decade. Lee's piece about the well-known murals by Diego Rivera in the Detroit Institute of Arts and the painter's supposedly 'inadequate' engagement with ethnic politics had the misfortune of being published less than a year after a brilliant article on the same topic by Dylan Miner (a labour activist and scholar with close ties to the Mexican-American community in Detroit).<sup>20</sup> Whether one has in mind the far more extensive research done by Miner or his much more nuanced and complex framework for addressing Rivera's militant activism in the Detroit area (which was illegal according to the terms of Rivera's green card), the earlier article makes Lee's essay look painfully superficial.

The ethnocentric essay by Mary K. Coffey is also crammed with factual errors and theoretical miscues. It is, for example, unacceptable to claim that there was only one dominant discourse concerning Native American culture, entitled simply the 'discourse of the native', within the post-revolutionary state. As both Alberto Híjar and Barbara Braun have demonstrated at considerable length, there were within the post-revolutionary debate several and often antithetical types of *indigenismo* (indigenism): from that of Vasconcelos on the political right through Gamio in the centre to Rivera (and Mariátegui) on the left.<sup>21</sup>

The leftist interpretation of *indigenismo*, in relation to the heterodox Marxism from Latin America, was called '*indigenismo alternativo*' by Híjar in his invaluable study *Diego Rivera: Contribución política* from 1986 (revised and republished in 2004).<sup>22</sup> Rivera never painted 'the Indian' or 'the native', but only different, very specific 'nations' of indigenous peoples like those of the Aztecs, the Mayas, the Toltecs and so forth. Nor was there only one unified national narrative in this period, but rather several competing narratives that frequently made joint appearances in these Mexican murals. Finally, it is far too deterministic and one-dimensional to say, as Coffey does, that Mexican mural-

20 Miner 2005.

21 Braun 1993, pp. 185–250.

22 Híjar Serrano 2004, pp. 29–37.

ism was simply part 'of a disciplinary program for public education'.<sup>23</sup> On the contrary, Mexican muralism was triggered by and in turn helped to propel a dialogic process that involved popular self-empowerment, just as much as it entailed (decentred) nation/state building from the top down. Like this book, *The Social and the Real*, Mexican murals were sites of contestation, not just a force for domination.

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23 Anreus, Linden and Weinberg 2006, p. 70.

**PART 5**

***Abstract Expressionism***





## Abstract Expressionism, Automatism and the Age of Automation

Suppose that we assume that, despite defaults and confusions, modern art succeeded in ridding us of the costumes of the past, of kings and queens and the glory of conquerors and politicians and mountains, rhetoric and the grand, that *it became, though 'understood' only by a minority, a people's art*, a peculiarly modern humanism, that its tactics in relation to the general human situation were those of gentle, strong and humane men *defending their values with intelligence and ingenuity against the property-loving world* [my italics] ... one might say that it is only the most inhuman professions in modern society that permit the agent to behave nicely in everyday life and to regard the world with a merry and well-glassed eye.

ROBERT MOTHERWELL, 1948<sup>1</sup>

...

I think we are craftsmen ... but we have no position in the world – absolutely no position except that we just insist upon being around.

WILLEM DE KOONING, 1950<sup>2</sup>

...

Almost fifteen years ago Harold Rosenberg challenged me to explain what one of my paintings could possibly mean to the world. My answer was that if he and others could read it properly it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism. That answer still goes.

BARNETT NEWMAN, 1962<sup>3</sup>

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1 Motherwell, 1948, p. 47.

2 Goodnough, 1951, p. 16.

3 Newman 1962, p. 87.

I have always detested chauvinism ... and one of the first things that impressed me about Pollock was his lack of chauvinism ... *Pollock in fact had very leftist political views that seemingly had little to do with his art* [my italics].

ROBERT MOTHERWELL, 1967<sup>4</sup>



During the 1950s, Meyer Schapiro defended Abstract Expressionism not only for its progressive use of non-Western cultural practices but also for its critical counter to the contemporary definition of labour.<sup>5</sup> As was true of his focus on the way Abstract Expressionism assimilated Third World art forms, Schapiro's discussion of this North American movement both as a form of labour 'opposed to the characteristics of industrial production' and as a new visual language 'opposed to communication as it is understood now' is also found in his exemplary essay of 1957, 'The Liberating Quality of Avant-Garde Art'.<sup>6</sup> Owing to the way he illuminated these three fundamental attributes, Schapiro could further observe that this post-war avant-garde within the US helped 'maintain the critical spirit' in the face of an ever ascendant multinational capitalism.<sup>7</sup>

4 Motherwell 1967, p. 65.

5 This article is a greatly expanded version of a lecture I gave during June 1988 at Universität Bremen, where I was a visiting lecturer. I would like to thank Michael Müller as well as Peter Bürger for arranging this lecture series and the students of Bremen for their stimulating responses to my presentations. In addition, I would like to express gratitude to Perry Anderson, Colleen Kattau and Stephen Eisenman for discussing some of the ideas at issue in this essay with me. I would also like to state my admiration for the remarkable career of Meyer Schapiro, whose intellectual integrity continues to inspire progressive people within art history. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the importance of Serge Guilbaut's research on Abstract Expressionism (in spite of the fact that we disagree on a number of points), as a forceful stimulus as well as significant foil for my own work in this area.

6 Schapiro 1978, pp. 213–26.

7 Schapiro 1978, p. 226. Schapiro's ongoing engagement with Marxist political economy is clear enough. In 1983, for example, Helen Epstein wrote, after interviewing Schapiro extensively, that 'Meyer Schapiro still considers himself a sort of Marxist – an unorthodox one' (*Art News*, vol. 82, no. 6, Summer 1983, p. 84). Schapiro's sophistication in these matters was acknowledged by no less an authority than Marxist economist Leo Huberman, a founding editor of *Monthly Review*. In the preface to his book *Man's Wordly Goods*, a critique of the emergence of capitalism, Huberman thanked 'Dr. Meyer Schapiro, for his critical reading of



Of notable theoretical import is how Schapiro simultaneously analysed Abstract Expressionism as a form of labour *and* as a new visual language, each of which was seen in relation to human self-realisation *and* in light of a dialogical aesthetic necessitating viewer engagement. Recent critiques of language have much advanced this nexus of relationships by demonstrating that humanity shapes itself as much through language as through labour.<sup>8</sup> In acting as a formative force, not simply as a reproductive one, languages do not passively reflect society but rather actively function as material components whereby a society *variously* defines and produces what it is. Indeed, language (spoken and written) provides the basic network of ideological and communicative bonds which are both a *pre*-condition for and a result of the social relations of production in the workplace. In a word, without language there simply would be no collective labour.<sup>9</sup>

Since the destruction of the craft mode of production by the division of labour within industrial capitalism, art's relation to labour, not to mention craftsmanship, has been as contradictory as it is ill-defined in Western society. It was an awareness of this general problem which led Walter Benjamin to shift his critical analysis away from that of 'form and content' towards an examination of the nature of artistic production signified by an art work, along with a critique of the relation of this artistic production to the general mode of production in society. As Benjamin stated: 'Rather than ask, "What is the *attitude* of a work to the relations of production of its time?", I would like to ask, "What is its *position* in them?"'<sup>10</sup> The answer to this query would be ascertained by an analysis of the technique responsible for the art work, because 'the concept of technique provides the dialectical starting point from which the unfruitful antithesis of form and content can be surpassed'.<sup>11</sup>

In place of asking if the art work thematically declares the 'correct' political position or the 'right' subject matter, Benjamin said that one must instead determine whether the artist has incisively addressed his or her position in the process of production. If accomplished compellingly through one's technique (and Benjamin insisted that an artist who does not teach other artists does

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the manuscript and stimulating suggestions' (p. 7). Although this preface was written in 1936, it was retained for the later *Monthly Review* editions of the book in 1952, 1963 and 1968.

8 See, for example, Bakhtin and Medvedev 1978 [1928].

9 This fact was scientifically established by Charles Darwin's work on evolution, See Darwin 1979 [1871], pp. 161 ff.

10 Benjamin 1988 [1934], p. 222.

11 Ibid.

not teach anyone), then the resulting character of artistic production will help advance historical change by challenging art's institutionalised relation to the public. Thus, the new means of technical production conceived by artists 'is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers – that is, readers or spectators into collaborators'.<sup>12</sup> Such a process is most likely to occur if the productive means of the artist are *alienated from the capitalist mode of production in such a way as to point beyond the existing order of things*.

With characteristic subtlety and insight, Meyer Schapiro approached Abstract Expressionism in 1957 as a distinctive new mode of artistic production at odds with developments in post-war US society. Whether intentionally or not, Schapiro provided a particular answer to Benjamin's general charge concerning art in contemporary society. My aim in this study will be to outline and to extend Schapiro's contention that Abstract Expressionism at its best affirmed an historical concept of humanity 'in opposition to the contemporary qualities of the ordinary experience of working' within late capitalism.<sup>13</sup> I will then further explain how Abstract Expressionism was intended to embody a political critique of instrumental thinking in conjunction with an ideological critique of technologism. As such, my article will involve four parts: (1) an explication of Schapiro's original critique; (2) an outline of the period developments in political economy that form the context for his position; (3) a sustained examination of statements by the Abstract Expressionists themselves, which show clearly that their methods for producing art were *intentionally* at odds with the capitalist mode of production in the post-war period; and (4) a consideration of the unresolved difficulties that characterised this position of the Abstract Expressionists, thus allowing the temporary appropriation of this art for different ideological ends.

Once this assessment has been achieved, it will be possible, for example, to understand why Abstract Expressionism was neither an escapist flight into 'pure art' nor a misguided retreat to mysticism. Rather, this art signified a profound form of romantic anti-capitalism with substantial strengths and considerable weaknesses. Not surprisingly, in contradicting the society from which it arose this art was itself also deeply contradictory, yet in ways that often seem historically unavoidable and that were certainly not always politically reprehensible.

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12 Benjamin 1988 [1934], p. 233.

13 Schapiro 1978, p. 218.

### Abstract Expressionism as Anti-Capitalism

Since Schapiro's discussion of Abstract Expressionism's contravention of post-war wage labour has been largely ignored both by mainstream art historians and by their opponents on the left, I shall begin by outlining his position before seeking corroboration from political economy, as well as from statements by the Abstract Expressionists themselves. In contending that the radical changes in post-war US art were 'related to a broader and deeper reaction to basic elements of common experience', Schapiro contended that a consideration of this art should address 'new problems, situations, and experiences' that had arisen in society as a whole.<sup>14</sup> Among these issues, he listed the challenge of social conflict, the problem of the subject, and concomitant developments in science as well as in technology. His critical focus was mostly on painting in the post-war US (and his article was accompanied by a reproduction of Jackson Pollock's water-colour *No. 7, 1951*) because at that moment, painting was 'the domain in culture in which the contradiction between the professed ideals and the actuality' of society was most painfully clear.<sup>15</sup>

While eloquently adumbrating the historical context for the paradoxical relation of Abstract Expressionism to US society, Schapiro stated:

In a number of respects, painting and sculpture today may seem to be opposed to the general trend of life. Yet, in such opposition, these arts declare their humanity and importance. Painting and sculptures, let us observe, are the last handmade, personal objects within our culture. Almost everything else is produced industrially, in mass, and through a high division of labor. Few people are fortunate enough to make something that represents themselves, that issues, entirely from their hands and minds ...

Most work, even much scientific work, requires a division of labour, a separation between the individual and the final result ... Standardized objects produced impersonally and in quantity establish no bond between maker and user. They are mechanical products with only a passing and *instrumental value* [my italics] ... What is most important is that the practical activity by which we live is not satisfying: we cannot give it full loyalty, and its rewards do not compensate enough for the frustration

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14 Schapiro 1978, p. 217.

15 Schapiro 1978, p. 224.

and emptiness that arise from the lack of spontaneity and personal identifications in work.<sup>16</sup>

In response to these alienating conditions within the post-war US, Abstract Expressionism emerged as a way of producing art that was fundamentally at odds with the capitalist mode of production. According to Schapiro, this new art work symbolised above all a deep engagement of the self within work. And in a moving passage which deftly defined what most distinguished Abstract Expressionism from all earlier art, Schapiro stated that this new art work was more 'passionately than ever before, the occasion of spontaneity or intense feeling'.<sup>17</sup> He then enumerated the resulting formal traits, the visual idiom, unique to Abstract Expressionism, particularly in the paintings by Pollock and de Kooning from 1947 to 1950.

The consciousness of the personal and spontaneous in the painting and sculpture stimulates the artist to invent devices of handling, processing, surfacing, which confer to the utmost degree the aspect of the freely made. Hence the great importance of the mark, the stroke, the brush, the drip, the quality of the substance of the paint itself, and the surface of the canvas as a texture and field of operation – all are signs of the artist's active presence.

All these qualities may be regarded as means of affirming the individual in opposition to the contrary qualities of the ordinary experience of working ... [contrary] characteristics of industrial production, may be found also in the different sense of the words 'automatic' and 'accidental' as applied in painting, technology and the everyday world.

Modern painting is the first complex style in history which proceeds from elements that are not pre-ordered as closed articulated shapes. The artist today creates an order out of unordered variable elements to a greater degree than the artist of the past ... While in industry accident is that event which destroys an order ... in painting the random or accidental is the beginning of an order ... a kind of order that in the end retains the aspect of the original disorder as a manifestation of freedom.

This art is deeply rooted, I believe, in the self and its relation to the surrounding world. And the pathos of the reduction, or fragility of the self within a culture that becomes increasingly organized through industry, economy, and the state intensifies the desire of the artist to create forms

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16 Schapiro 1978, pp. 217–18.

17 Schapiro 1978, p. 218.

that will manifest his liberty in a striking way ... to reach out into common life. It becomes then a possession of everyone and is related to everyday experience.

If the painter cannot celebrate many current values, it may be that these values are not worth celebrating.<sup>18</sup>

Just as Abstract Expressionism was seen by Schapiro as a repudiation of capitalist wage labour and the particular division of labour on which it was predicated, so this art was also discussed as a rejection of the instrumental thinking orchestrated by this new technocracy's means of communication. In Schapiro's view, another aspect of Abstract Expressionism 'which is opposed to our actual world and yet is related to it' was the contradiction between this painting and 'what are called the "arts of communication"'.<sup>19</sup> The hegemonic mode of communication in the US was one of streamlined exclusions – 'a world of social relationships which is impersonal, calculated and controlled in its elements, aiming always at efficiency'.<sup>20</sup> Yet, conversely, what 'makes painting and sculpture so interesting in our times is their high degree of non-communication'.<sup>21</sup> As such, this new art failed to signify in conventional codes. It had no 'practical' message, 'no clear code or fixed vocabulary'.<sup>22</sup>

Abstract Expressionism thus signified a visual language 'in which communication seems to be deliberately presented'.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, the reception of this art, like its production, was 'a process ultimately opposed to communication as it is understood now'.<sup>24</sup> This was true, Schapiro observed, because these artists did not wish simply to transmit an 'already prepared and complete message to a relatively indifferent and impersonal receiver'.<sup>25</sup> In abrogating the normal function of language by affirming values that went beyond mere instrumental or technocratic concerns, the Abstract Expressionists wished to trigger a different and more critical thought process in the spectator. Rather than the prescribed message passively consumed, this art work depended on active 'contemplativeness and communication with the work of another human being'.<sup>26</sup>

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18 Schapiro 1978, pp. 218, 220–2, 226.

19 Schapiro 1978, p. 222.

20 Schapiro 1978, p. 223.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Schapiro 1978, p. 224.

As a result, Schapiro maintained that Abstract Expressionism at its most politically engaged and socially effective helped 'to maintain the critical spirit ... indispensable to the life of our culture'.<sup>27</sup>

Aside from the impediments posed by the anti-democratic organisation of the workplace within capitalism and the control by multi-national corporations over the means of communication within society at large, realisation of the oppositional intentions of Abstract Expressionism was also thwarted by the institutions *within* the US art world. Precisely because of the fact that the visual arts produced objects, Schapiro said, they were exposed 'more than the other arts to dangerous corruption'.<sup>28</sup> Even while advancing certain dimensions of human existence in material form, this art work could also succumb to the humanly negating logic of commodity fetishism as 'a unique commodity of high market value'.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, though, Schapiro noted that as of the mid-1950s 'no profession is as poor as the painter's ... *The painter cannot live by his art*' [my italics].<sup>30</sup>

The institutional mediation of how paintings were coming to be viewed as the most costly human-made objects in the world could none the less lead to appropriation or evisceration by the very existing order these painters criticised. For in the ascendant US art world, the perception of success 'stamped the painting as an object of speculation, confusing the values of art'.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the reception of art work could generate ideological legitimacy for its owner, instead of publicly challenging the whole process whereby this redefinition of art occurred. Having located the Abstract Expressionists in this paradoxical, even debilitating position, Schapiro then ended by reminding the reader that Abstract Expressionism had yet to garner the type of monetary success that would have effected a transvaluation of its contumacious aims.

With this unresolved conflict between the institutional framing of art and the individual intentions of artists, Schapiro's analysis reached an impasse concerning the broader signification of Abstract Expressionism. Subsequently, the paintings of Abstract Expressionism, which arose as an assimilation of non-Western cultural traditions and as a repudiation of commodity production in the US, would become quite precious commodities supposedly exalting the 'American Way'. (It is of note here that formalist critics such as Clement

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27 Schapiro 1978, p. 226.

28 Schapiro 1978, p. 224.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid. For recent confirmation of Schapiro's statement, see the careful examination of primary documents in this regard: Robson, 1985, pp. 19–23.

31 Ibid.

Greenberg, ever concerned with bowdlerising this art politically, would label it 'American' and in the 1960s would celebrate how the 'Jackson Pollock Market Soars'.<sup>32</sup> This later state of affairs, however, neither invalidates Schapiro's observation about the artistic intent motivating the work's conception nor forecloses a progressive disappropriation of Abstract Expressionism along these lines.

The frequent signification of this art work within the US art world at present (Latin America is another matter) as mere disengaged private expression does point to some serious limitations of this art. Such a situation does not demonstrate the uselessness of Abstract Expressionism for posing critical alternatives, however. Rather, we are reminded of the ongoing pertinence of such an alternative reading of Abstract Expressionism, however marginalised and incomplete this interpretation might be at present in the US. There is little doubt that Willem de Kooning encapsulated both the original intent of this art, as well as its early reception, when he stated: 'I think we are craftsmen ... but we have no position in this world'.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Mark Rothko recognised well the process of appropriation threatening the Abstract Expressionists when he observed in 1947:

A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of the sensitive observer. It dies by the same token. It is therefore a risky and unfeeling act to send it out into the world.<sup>34</sup>

### The Age of Automation and 'Scientific Management'

Far from simply reflecting ideological and industrial developments both in the US and Europe, Abstract Expressionist paintings at first contested and only later seemed to confirm fundamental structural developments in other spheres, because of the way this art was partially appropriated through art-world institutions. A summary of the historical context in the post-war US will clearly demonstrate how the above-mentioned process of making Abstract Expressionist paintings – as well as the distinctive objects resulting from this process – originally signified a critique of what occurred in the workplace during this period.

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32 Greenberg 1996b [1961], pp. 107–14.

33 Goodnough 1951, p. 16.

34 Rothko 1947, p. 41.

Along with the enormous new accumulation of wealth in the post-war US, which saw per capita living standards rise substantially, there were some regressive developments concomitant with the wholesale consolidation of what has been called the third great revolution in technology, namely, the 'Age of Automation'.<sup>35</sup> While the early nineteenth century saw a transition from handicraft-made steam engines to machine-made steam engines, and the early twentieth century ushered in a change to electric or combustion engines, *the post-1945 period was dominated by the generalised control of machines through electronic apparatuses*.<sup>36</sup> The principle behind this impetus towards fully automated mass production that resulted even in machine-made raw materials and synthetic foodstuffs was, as political economist Ernest Mandel has noted, that of "‘emancipating’ industry from the human hand".<sup>37</sup>

The post-war drive by Western capital 'to eliminate living labour from the process of production'<sup>38</sup> involved an effort to reduce wages while simultaneously reconstituting the industrial reserve army. Predicated as it was on private property and commodity production, this process of capitalist 'modernisation' was based on the generation of surplus value for capital by lowering wages in relative terms. Such a diminution in wages was achieved by an expansion of the labour force, through the use of more automated technology to accomplish a new level of global unemployment, or what apologists for this system term a heightening of 'competition' among workers. (Needless to say, the use of automation by and on behalf of the workers will be consistently possible only in a post-capitalist society based on workplace democracy.)<sup>39</sup>

The new job insecurity of the post-war US resulting from the growing threat of displacement through automation was permitted by several changes by political repression in the 1950s of the left, by a demobilisation of the labour organisations so powerful and progressive in the 1930s (through such legislation as the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947), and by an unprecedented succession of US military interventions abroad (both to expand the source of cheap labour and to deny democratic self-determination by foreign workers). All of this dramatically lowered relative wages in the Third World, as multinational US capital penetrated into economic regions characterised by a low organic composition of capital. The key doctrine for this military intervention in the periphery of the world economic order was the Truman Doctrine of 1947, which

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35 Mandel 1975, p. 191. See also, Pollock 1964 and Rezler 1969.

36 Mandel 1975, p. 120.

37 Mandel 1975, p. 193.

38 Ibid.

39 Mandel 1975, pp. 206–16.



endorsed a global campaign by the US against 'Communism' (or, as its opponents countered, against the right of non-Western workers to resist being reduced to cheap labour by 'free' enterprise) and resulted in the systematic support of a remarkable number of ultra-right-wing military dictatorships that dutifully guaranteed 'economic stability' for US capital.<sup>40</sup>

The substantial success enjoyed by US capital in the 'Age of Automation', particularly from the mid-1940s through to the early 1960s, has been amply documented by official US statistics. From 1946 to 1961, the domestic working class increased by 35 percent and its total physical output rose by 70 percent while workers' real wages rose only 29 per cent, all of which translated into a notable rise in the rate of surplus value expropriated by capital from 1940 to 1966.<sup>41</sup> This same period saw investment in automation reach 18 percent of all new investments by 1963, while 21,000 of the 32,000 major US manufacturing establishments had become largely automated by the early 1960s. This 'modernisation' through automation occurred in four basic ways: (1) through a transfer of parts between successive productive processes based on automatic devices, as in Detroit automobile plants; (2) through continuous flow processes with automatic controls over the flow, as in chemical, oil, gas and electric utilities; (3) through computer-controlled processes, as in the communication industries; and (4) through a combination of the above.<sup>42</sup>

In US society as a whole, the post-war age of automation, or what is now known as the 'hi-tech' era, has produced two main ideological tendencies to legitimate such inequitable developments. These are the ideologies of technicism and of 'scientific management', or what the Frankfurt School has aptly labelled the 'instrumental reasoning' of scientism.<sup>43</sup> As Ernest Mandel has maintained, 'belief in the omnipotence of technology', not just in its *potential* efficacy, has gained ascendancy with late capitalism.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, just as technocratic decisions are a matter of professional expertise and not of majority choice, so 'modernisation' is increasingly defined in the quantitative terms of economic 'efficiency', not with respect to a qualitative progression in the living

40 For a well-documented look at US military intervention on behalf of multinational corporations, see the following: Chomsky and Herman 1980; Barnett 1964 and Burbach and Flynn 1984. In particular, see, for example, Chincilla and Hamilton 1984, pp. 213–49.

41 For these statistics and others, see *The Economic Report of the President to the US Congress*, Washington DC, January 1962. See also, Mandel 1975, pp. 176–9.

42 For the statistics on investment, see Froomkin 1968, p. 180. Also, see Mandel 1975, pp. 194–8. For the discussion of the whole process of automation, see Rezler 1964.

43 See, for example Adorno and Horkheimer 1972 [1944], and Marcuse 1964.

44 Mandel 1975, p. 501.

standards of the majority. Indeed, the contradictory nature of gauging modern development strictly along the quantitative technical lines of the 'leading economic indicators' was aptly summed up by the president of Brazil who, a few years ago, stated that the Brazilian economy was doing fine, but that most people in Brazil were not (Brazil experienced a US-backed military coup in 1964, which overthrew a democratically elected government).<sup>45</sup>

Significantly, it was in 1944 that T.W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer published their now classic critique of technology, scientism and instrumental thinking, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>46</sup> Their analysis of the paradoxical role of 'reason' in modern Western society underscored how it has signified on the one hand 'the idea of a free, humane, and social life' and has meant on the other hand 'the court of judgment of calculation' subordinate to the 'ratio of capital'.<sup>47</sup> In this way, the development of reason in modern Western society has been deeply contradictory. From being a necessary means both of societal self-preservation and general human self-realisation, reason has also become the opposite, namely, a narrowly circumscribed instrument of domination, rather than general liberation, whereby a minority has protected its privileges against the majority.

In league with capitalist modernisation, instrumental thinking hardened first into a technologist view for the domination of nature and then into a technocratic view for the domination of people (labour). Early on in this process, nature was stripped of all integrative qualities and instead became a phenomenon to be controlled for quantitative gain. Human reason itself also became constrictively redefined as part of this system's 'pragmatic' logic. From being a fundamental mode of self-realisation interdependent with the progress of humanity in general, synthetic reason has been reduced to a narrow technique for instrumental thought and self-interested thinking. While the progression of human reason in a rational society is inextricably connected to the end of all exploitation, instrumental thinking conversely operates in exploited and exploitative circumstances. This reification of reason, into what Marcuse incisively called 'one-dimensional thought', was based on a fetishism of science.<sup>48</sup> While modern science at its best is a way of empirically describing natural phenomena in quantitative terms, scientism (the ideological form of fetishised science) is the unjustified transposition of this technique for quantification

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45 Cited in Sweezy 1982, p. 217.

46 Adorno and Horkheimer 1972 [1944].

47 Adorno and Horkheimer 1972 [1944], pp. 7, 83–4.

48 Marcuse 1964, pp. 146 ff.

into historical situations and political circumstances that are necessarily qualitative, never merely natural, and certainly not neutral.

Nowhere was the attendant human abuse of applied scientism more obvious than in the work place of post-1945 US society. It was there, in tandem with the Age of Automation, that F.W. Taylor's principles of 'scientific management' were first used in a sustained way on the workforce.<sup>49</sup> Unlike Adam Smith's discussion of the new division of labour during the early phase of the industrial revolution (when it was assumed that this development in specialisation would *not* lead to the intellectual disengagement of ordinary workers), Taylor's view was that further 'progress' depended on just such an elimination of all intellectual involvement by wage labour. According to Taylor's principles, which although conceived in the early twentieth century were consolidated systematically only after 1945, all intellectual engagement must henceforth become the exclusive prerogative of management and the factory owners.<sup>50</sup>

F.W. Taylor's three basic concepts of 'scientific management' involved undisguised ways to cheapen labour, thus reducing overheads and enlarging output. First, management should dissociate the labour process from any need for skills on the part of workers. Second, management should orchestrate a thorough separation of conception from execution within the workplace, thus eradicating any intellectual decision-making by workers. Third, management should exercise complete control over *all* knowledge necessary for production, so as to ensure itself *total* authority in the labour process.<sup>51</sup>

The human alienation fostered by such work conditions in post-war society is quite self-evident. Indeed, as early as 1844, Marx pointed out how the anti-democratic and dehumanising logic of capital would increasingly cause wage labourers to be alienated in four ways: (a) from the object of production; (b) from the process of production; (c) from each other; and (d) from themselves (as thinking, feeling, and physically *developing* human beings).<sup>52</sup> As for the ever more pronounced conflict between capitalism and democracy in post-1945 North America, labour economist Harry Braverman summed it up well when, in a classic study of 1974, he observed that 'workers in each industry today are far less capable of operating that industry than were the workers of

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49 Braverman 1974, pp. 113–33, 231–42.

50 See, for example, Taylor 1967 [1911], p. 36. For the very different position of Adam Smith, see Smith 1937 [1789], p. 9. Smith associated the division of labour with increasing numbers of inventions *by* workers.

51 Taylor 1967 [1911], pp. 22, 36–8, 62. Also see Braverman 1967 [1911], pp. 112–21.

52 Marx 1964 [1844], pp. 106–15.

a half-century ago'.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the process overseen by 'scientific management' has now 'concentrated in 3 per cent of the entire working population' the technical knowledge necessary to operate US industry. In a country of almost 240,000,000 people, only 10,000 individuals from the corporate boards and their managerial staffs have any systematic intellectual involvement with the very industry on which the entire US depends. In keeping with this configuration of power, Milton Friedman (a major North American apologist for multinational capitalism and an advisor to right-wing military dictators in Latin America, such as Pinochet in Chile) has even assumed that pronounced inequality in economics is a prerequisite for political 'freedom'.<sup>54</sup>

Nor is it surprising that 'scientific management' would have an equally implausible counterpart in formalist criticism which, as Greenberg has acknowledged, is based on positivism – the analogue in philosophy of technologism and scientism.<sup>55</sup> As Casey Blake has noted, the desire to reconcile post-war US art, such as Abstract Expressionism, with contemporary industrial developments expressed itself in Greenberg's transformation of vanguard cultural radicalism into 'the administration of a self-referential cultural idiom by a cultural elite – in short, into aesthetic engineering'.<sup>56</sup> In this way, a concept of artist progress arose that was characterised by a linear, technocratic variant of modernism, which generally corresponded to the technologist modernisation of post-war capitalism. In accordance with his managerial role, Greenberg redefined the relationship between the critic and the artist 'along lines parallel to the industrial division of labour between administrator and worker', so that Greenberg himself could function as the chief quality controller for the supposed line of luxurious objects produced by the US art world.<sup>57</sup>

Revealingly, the entirely different conceptual framework used by Meyer Schapiro to discuss Abstract Expressionism finds much more ready corrobor-

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53 Braverman 1974, p. 231 and p. 242.

54 Braverman 1974, p. 242. For Friedman's linkage of 'freedom' and inequality, see Friedman 1962, pp. 5, 17. For a critique of the economic policies of Pinochet and Friedman, see Orlando 1989. Less than a month after this critique of Friedman's influence was published in *The Nation* on 28 August 1976, Letelier was assassinated by Chilean Secret Service agents on 21 September 1976, within a few blocks of the White House in Washington, DC. See Dinges and Landau 1980.

55 Greenberg 1961, p. 120 and 139. For a critique of Greenberg's positivism, see Craven 1977 (the first chapter of this book).

56 Blake 1981, p. 41. For an excellent critique of Greenberg's early criticism, see Gagnon 1979, pp. 16–42.

57 Gagnon 1979, p. 42.

ation both in the paintings of these artists and in the Abstract Expressionists' own unequivocal opposition to scientism, technologism, and wage-labour alienation (on which we will focus in part three of the present text). Far from being the consequence of pre-determined formal problems, as formalist versions of modernism maintain, these artistic innovations occurred at the juncture of diverse historical developments that Schapiro aptly disclosed. Abstract Expressionism was, he said, 'a break with the kind of painting that was important in the 1920s' because 'the experiences of the last twenty-five years have made such confidence in the values of technology less interesting and even distasteful'.<sup>58</sup>

The military rise of fascism in the 1930s, the unparalleled holocaust of the Second World War, and finally the invention as well as use of the atomic bomb in 1945 accounts for the way that progressive forces in the West, including Meyer Schapiro and the Abstract Expressionists, repudiated the unqualified adulation of technology by the early avant-garde (particularly the machinalotry of Futurism and the 'machine aesthetic' of the 1920s). This new position did not entail a neo-Luddite rejection of technology *per se* but rather a critical appraisal of how technology was not an end in itself, as is assumed by the ideology of technologism. Thus, technology was seen by post-war progressives as an awesome force no better or worse than the system of political economy that used it. As Schapiro indicated, after the 1930s the left had increasingly recognised that, instead of automatically producing new social relations, technology is itself often reproductive of the social relations manufactured by the established order controlling the design, use and deployment of this technology.

In a related and quite important discussion of technologism on the eve of World War II, Walter Benjamin pointed out how 'the technological formula may be stated as follows: only war makes it possible to mobilize all of today's technical resources while maintaining the property system'.<sup>59</sup> Because the progressive use of productive forces is necessarily impeded by the resolutely hierarchical nature of private property within late capitalism, Benjamin observed that the increasing development of technology is channelled in a non-utilitarian direction, that is, the aesthetics of war. As such, the tremendous discrepancy between new technological possibilities and old social uses of this technology creates a convulsive situation. Technological innovations go from being tools of construction to being instruments of domination and implements of destruction, even as the avowed aim of 'modernisation' is to build the future. In this regard, there was even a temporary convergence between fascism (a desper-

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58 Schapiro 1978 [1957], p. 219.

59 Benjamin 1969, pp. 241–2.

ate attempt to save the status quo by means of state capitalism) and Futurism (a minority tendency within the European avant-garde, which was otherwise opposed to capitalism).<sup>60</sup> For as Benjamin observed, both Mussolini and Marinetti expected war to provide the aesthetic gratification for a sensory perception changed by the new technology – an aesthetic experience that would be the *reductio ad absurdum* of 'l'art pour l'art'.<sup>61</sup>

Concerning the catalytic character of the earlier machine age for the socially progressive avant-garde before 1940 – from Parisian Cubism and Russian Constructivism through the early Bauhaus and Léger's 'machine aesthetic' – Perry Anderson has explained that it occurred at a certain moment in history when such art affirmation of technology was possible because of 'the imaginative proximity of social revolution',<sup>62</sup> for in Europe during this period, no bourgeois democracy was consolidated as a political form, nor was the European labour movement co-opted as a transformative force. The possible revolutionary result of a downfall of the old order was as yet still ambiguous.

As for the historical preconditions for Cubism, Constructivism and the Bauhaus before the 1930s, Anderson has noted that the potential of the new machine age was a forceful stimulus for the avant-garde. Nonetheless, the presupposition of their interest was an abstraction of technology from the social relations responsible for it, so that in no case was capitalism as such ever exalted by the avant-garde. This extrapolation was still plausible owing to the sheer incipience of the yet to be determined socio-economic system in the West that was later to circumscribe the promise of the new machine age so emphatically.<sup>63</sup>

The European avant-garde of 1900 to 1935 consequently emerged at the historic intersection of a still potent classical past, a still indeterminate technological present, and a still undetermined political future. All of these coordinates were altered but not eliminated by the First World War. Instead, it was the Second World War which, in markedly determining the fate of each of these three developments, abrogated the earlier historical context in relation to which the European avant-garde attained its greatest vitality and most profound promise.<sup>64</sup> The new relations that emerged in the West after 1945 have been deftly outlined by Anderson:

60 For two of the best critiques of fascism, see Marcuse 1954, pp. 402–19; and Togliatti 1976.

61 Benjamin 1969, pp. 241–2.

62 Anderson 1984, p. 104.

63 Anderson 1984, pp. 104–5.

64 Ibid.

Bourgeois democracy, was finally universalized ... At the same time Fordism arrived in force ... There could no longer be the smallest doubt as to what kind of society this technology would consolidate: an oppressively stable, monolithically industrial, capitalist civilization ... Finally, the image or hope of revolution faded away in the West, with the onset of the Cold War and the Sovietization of Eastern Europe, for a whole historical period ...

In their place, there now reigned a routinized, bureaucratized economy of universal commodity production, in which mass consumption and mass culture had become virtually interchangeable terms. The post-war avant-gardes were to be essentially defined against this quite new backdrop ... After the moment of Abstract Expressionism – the last genuine avant-garde of the West ... What marks, the typical situation of the contemporary artist in the West, it may be said, is, on the contrary, the closure of horizons ...

This is not true, manifestly, of the Third World ... [where] socialist revolution haunts these societies as a permanent possibility ... These are the conditions that have produced the genuine masterpieces of recent years: novels like Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, from Columbia or India, or films like Yilmiz Güney's *Yol* from Turkey.<sup>65</sup>

Among the questions which this insightful discussion by Anderson illuminates is why Surrealism, the European avant-garde least identified with modern technology and also least Eurocentric in character, should be the most potent force for Abstract Expressionism after 1945. In addition, we can also understand why Surrealism itself has increasingly found renewal (as Breton predicted it would) in the Third World.<sup>66</sup> The *realismo mágico* of contemporary Latin American art, for example, is in many ways one of the most profound heirs to the Surrealist movement.

65 Anderson 1984, pp. 106–9.

66 André Breton specifically underscored the non-Western impetus for Surrealism in a series of statements from the mid-1940s. In 1945, he told a young Haitian poet that 'Surrealism is allied with peoples of colour ... because it has sided with them against all forms of imperialism' (Breton 1978 [1945a], 'Interview with René Bélance', p. 256). In the same year, Breton told a group of Haitian poets that 'the greatest impulses towards new paths for surrealism have been furnished by my greatest "coloured" friends – Aimé Césaire in poetry. Wifredo Lam in painting' (Breton 1978 [1945b], 'Speech to Young Haitian Poets', p. 260.) Ades 1988, p. 17 has further discussed the non-Eurocentric nature of Surrealist collage.

### Critiques by the Abstract Expressionists of Technologism and Scientism

Even a cursory consideration of the statements by the Abstract Expressionists themselves is sufficient to demonstrate that they intended their 'automatic' handmade works as a commentary on the dehumanising developments intrinsic to the Age of Automation after 1945. This not only involved a reclamation of 'outdated' non-European art forms from the North-West Coast or Latin America, but also a recourse to non-Western techniques such as that of the Navajos for painting on the floor. Both of these manoeuvres were allied to a redefinition of Western oil painting through the assimilation of a mural-sized format from Mexican art. In turn, all of these traits were related to a new vocabulary of improvised visual forms, which accented the artisanal and inalienably human quality of this process of artistic production.

As Jackson Pollock noted, '[c]raftsmanship is essential to the artist' for responding to 'the aims of the age we're living in'.<sup>67</sup> The hand-inflected, manual traces of these paintings in turn inter-related with the non-mimetic character of Abstract Expressionism, because, as Pollock observed, 'the modern artist is living in a mechanical age and we have mechanical means of representing objects'.<sup>68</sup> Willem de Kooning was no less insistent on the interventionary role of artisanal labour in the production of art. In the well-known discussions at Studio 35 in 1950, de Kooning prefaced his remarks on the necessity of craftsmanship and his need to 'force my attitude upon this world' with the view that in making art 'there is no such thing as being anonymous'.<sup>69</sup>

Significantly, much of the discussion among the artists at Studio 35 involved whether or not an artwork should look or be 'finished'. De Kooning himself said: 'I refrain from "finishing" it. I paint myself out of the picture'.<sup>70</sup> He then criticised contemporary French paintings for evincing a certain 'touch' that 'makes them look like a "finished" painting'.<sup>71</sup> Other Abstract Expressionists and the artists associated with them generally voiced a comparable view. Barnett Newman declared: 'I think the idea of a "finished" picture is a fiction'.<sup>72</sup> He subsequently said: 'The artist's intention is what gives a specific thing form'.<sup>73</sup> (Both

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67 Pollock 1982, p. 2.

68 Pollock 1982 [1947–48], p. 6.

69 Goodnough 1951, p. 15.

70 Goodnough 1951, p. 12.

71 Goodnough 1951, p. 13.

72 Goodnough 1951, p. 12.

73 Goodnough 1951, p. 18.



of these concepts utterly contradict the concern of formalists with 'resolved' art that is important not because of artistic intent, but because of the finished *object* that results whether intentionally or otherwise.) Reinhardt added a statement analogous to that of Newman when he stated that 'the emphasis with us is upon a painting experience'.<sup>74</sup> This position moved Reinhardt to ask, 'Is there anyone here who considers himself a producer of beautiful objects?' (to which no one responded affirmatively).<sup>75</sup>

Elsewhere, Robert Motherwell specifically identified this new concept of painting as a signifier of improvised, non-regulated human labour and thus as a critique of the standardisation and instrumentalism endemic to the capitalist mode of production in the post-war US:

If a painting does not make human contact, it is nothing ... Pictures are vehicles of passion, of all kinds and orders, not pretty luxuries like sports cars ... For this reason, *the act of painting is a deep human necessity, not the production of a hand-made commodity*. [my italics]<sup>76</sup>

In elaborating on the making of art, Motherwell explained that 'painting and sculpture are not skills that can be taught in reference to pre-established criteria', but entail 'a process, whose content is found, subtle, and deeply felt'.<sup>77</sup> He extended this line of reasoning by contending:

I don't exploit so-called accidents in painting. I accept them if they seem appropriate ... *One doesn't want a picture to look 'made' like an automobile or loaf of bread in waxed paper*. Precision belongs to the world of machinery – which has its own forms of the beautiful. One admires Léger. But machinery created with brush and paint is ridiculous, all the same ... I agree with Renoir, who loved everything hand-made.<sup>78</sup>

The profoundly avant-garde nature of the Abstract Expressionist movement, with its commitment to a type of human engagement at odds with the existing order, was a theme that clearly surfaced in the Studio 35 symposium as well as elsewhere:

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74 Goodnough 1951, p. 14.

75 Goodnough 1951, p. 18.

76 Motherwell 1982 [1955], p. 29.

77 Motherwell 1985 [1951], p. 235.

78 Motherwell 1985 [1963], p. 236.

*Newman:* The thing that binds us together is that we consider painting to be a profession in an 'ideal society' ... We go into normal society and insist on acting on our own terms.

*Motherwell* (to Newman): You mean that we are not acting in relation to the goals that most people in our society accept?

*Newman:* Yes ...

*Motherwell:* What distinguishes these people is that they are trying to act ideally in a non-ideal society.

*Reinhardt:* Does not one have to remove oneself from the business world in order to create 'fine' art or to exist as a 'fine artist'?<sup>79</sup>

With two contemporary papers – 'The Renaissance and Order' (1950) and 'What Abstract Art Means to Me' (1951) – Willem de Kooning reinterpreted classic art as well as modernist art in such a way as to emphasise the improvisatory human engagement of art production and to repudiate the ideologies of technologism and scientism. In the first of these, de Kooning specifically rejected the idea that what was most important to the Renaissance artist was the science of perspective (a misguided view he ascribes to 'philosophers and educators of commercial art').<sup>80</sup> Far from being a matter of mechanical rules, he said, 'Painting was more intellectual than that'.<sup>81</sup> Instead, the Renaissance painter made works, in order 'to be, so to speak, on the inside of his picture'.<sup>82</sup>

But this use of art that both artisanally and conceptually affirmed human self-realisation (the real subject of art to him) became increasingly uncommon, according to de Kooning, because of the demands placed on artists by practical-minded bourgeois patrons. Concerning the ever more mechanical, ever less humanly meaningful production of paintings, de Kooning declared: 'That's what happened when the burghers got hold of art, and got hold of man, too, for that matter'.<sup>83</sup>

In discussing the growing use of paintings to celebrate objects *per se*, rather than the human acts that went into producing them (all of which increasingly occurred in the mercantile phase of capitalism to which he was referring), de Kooning added: 'although I, myself, don't care for all the pots and pans in the paintings of burghers ... I do like the idea that they – the pots and

79 Goodnough 1951, p. 21.

80 de Kooning 1968 [1951], p. 141.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 de Kooning 1968 [1951], p. 142.

pans I mean – are always in relation to man'.<sup>84</sup> Significantly, the legacy of Renaissance art for ordering nature effectively was equated by de Kooning with the desire to quantify nature as well as society – a view that directly recalls the famous critique of instrumental reasoning by Adorno and Horkheimer. These Frankfurt philosophers observed, for example, in 1944, that today 'Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence',<sup>85</sup> while de Kooning ended his essay of 1950 with a delightful anecdote that ridiculed the pervasive quantification of nature and humanity in Western society:

There was the village idiot. His name was Plank and he measured everything. He measured roads, toads, and his own feet; fences, his nose and windows, trees, saws, and caterpillars. Everything was there already to be measured by him ... He had no nostalgia, neither a memory nor a sense of time. All that he noticed about himself was that his length changed.<sup>86</sup>

In a slightly later commentary on the 'machine aesthetic' of the avant-garde before the Second World War, de Kooning both admired and rejected this type of art, in addition to the scientism it presupposed. As he explained the historical link between scientism and the machine aesthetic, de Kooning also said that the ultimate and unwanted results of this *Weltanschauung* based on a reification of science were twofold, namely, (1) military conflict and (2) 'purely' formalist art. As such, he declared:

These latter-day artists were bothered by their apparent uselessness ... these estheticians proposed that people up to now understood painting in terms of their own private misery. Their own sentiment of form instead was one of comfort. The beauty of comfort ... *That millions of people have died in war since then, because of the idea of comfort, is something else* [my italics].

*This pure form of comfort became the comfort of 'pure form'* [my italics]. The 'nothing' part in a painting until then ... they generalized with their book-keeping minds, into circles and squares ... But this idea made them go backward in spite of the fact that they wanted to go forward. That 'something' which was not measurable, they lost by trying to make it

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84 de Kooning 1968 [1951], p. 143.

85 Adorno and Horkheimer 1972 [1994], p. 7.

86 de Kooning 1968, p. 143.

measurable ... The sentiments of the Futurists were simpler ... Either a man was a machine or else a sacrifice to make machines with.<sup>87</sup>

From here de Kooning went on to attack sharply the fetishism of science within post-war US society, particularly on the part of Cold War liberals. In so doing, he caustically referred to the new technocratic romance with atomic weaponry.

The argument often used that science is really abstract and that painting could be like music ... is utterly ridiculous. That space of science – the space of the physicists – I am truly bored with now ... There seems to be no end to the misery of the scientists' space ... Today, some people think that the light of the atom bomb will change the concept of painting once and for all. The eyes that actually saw the light melted out of sheer ecstasy. For one instant, everybody was the same color ...<sup>88</sup>

In his critique of the prevailing values responsible for instrumental thought, scientism and formalism, de Kooning underscored the dissident position of himself and of other Abstract Expressionists. By the way he defended this group, de Kooning presented it as avant-garde in the deepest sense, namely as a movement not simply on behalf of a new style for art, but rather in favour of an alternative concept of life through art. As Peter Bürger has observed, what was negated by an avant-garde group was not an earlier form of art so much as 'Art' institutionally disconnected from praxis.<sup>89</sup> Thus, for the avant-garde, the demand was not raised simply at the level of the content of individual works. Instead, Bürger stated, the avant-garde directed itself to the way art functions in society. De Kooning attested to this strategy when he rejected formalism (although clearly not formal values *per se*) by observing, 'I never was interested in how to make a good painting'.<sup>90</sup> He then further repudiated Greenberg's contention in 1947 that Matisse's greatness resulted from his escapist desire to produce art that functioned as an armchair for the tired businessman. To the contrary, de Kooning said:

Art never seems to me peaceful or pure. I always seem to be wrapped in the melodrama of society ... Some painters, including myself, do not care what chair they are sitting on ... They do not want to 'sit in style'. Rather

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87 de Kooning 1951, pp. 144–5.

88 de Kooning 1968 [1951], p. 146.

89 Bürger 1984 [1974], p. 22.

90 de Kooning 1968 [1963], p. 149.

they have found that *painting ... is a way of living today, a style of living* [my italics]. That is where the form of it lies. Those artists do not want to conform.<sup>91</sup>

In 1963 de Kooning recapitulated these ideas, if at times elliptically, when he again opposed Greenberg's variety of formalism, while also expressing a sense of alienation from the hegemonic values of the post-war US. About being an artist in the US, de Kooning remarked: 'America never really cared much for people who do those things'.<sup>92</sup> He then concluded, at a time when he was becoming a public opponent of the Vietnam War, 'it is a certain burden, this American-ness ... I feel much more in common with artists in London or Paris'.<sup>93</sup> Similarly, in looking back on his work from the 1950s, de Kooning expressed surprise at the depth of alienation conveyed by his *Women* series: 'I look at them now and they seem vociferous and ferocious'.<sup>94</sup>

None of the Abstract Expressionists, however, was more systematic in his critique of post-war culture than was Barnett Newman. Contrary to what most art historians have maintained (Annette Cox and Ann Gibson are exceptions here), Newman's principled position on behalf of being *engagé* did not collapse into an 'apolitical' 'art for art's sake' stance.<sup>95</sup> From the early 1930s to his death in 1970, Newman developed an increasingly nuanced defence of anarchist ideals that he consistently, indeed insistently, related to his own art work throughout this entire period.

Although he was unusual among the Abstract Expressionists in two respects – he did not work with the WPA Federal Art Project and was never a fellow traveller of the Communist Party (he was also one of the few Abstract Expressionists not from the working class) – Barnett Newman was, like several of the rest, a long-time anarchist (Gottlieb, Rothko and Still arrived at this position somewhat later). As early as 1933, Newman ran for mayor of New York City as an anarchist. Among his proposals were the city or community ownership of banks, business and housing; a system of municipal galleries and orchestra halls providing free services to the public; the closing of streets to private automobiles so as to reinvigorate public space for pedestrians as well as cafés;

91 de Kooning 1968 [1951], p. 145.

92 de Kooning 1968 [1963], p. 147.

93 Ibid.

94 de Kooning 1968 [1963].

95 Thomas Hess, a close friend of Newman, also underscored Newman's political convictions. See Hess 1971, p. 18. Also, see Cox 1982, pp. 67–82 and Gibson 1988, pp. 14–22.

and, more whimsically, playgrounds for adults.<sup>96</sup> All of these views were clearly predicated on the anarchist contention – from Bakunin and Tolstoy through Kropotkin and Emma Goldman – that the decentralised Russian peasant communes (*mir*) had already demonstrated the superiority of communal forms of social development over those dominated by private property (as in the US) or directed by a centralised national state (as in the USSR).<sup>97</sup>

From the mid-1940s through to the late 1960s, Newman published a series of articles on the history of art, in which he used anarchist terminology and made clear his opposition to the system of corporate capitalism. Only a few years before Cold War liberals were celebrating the ‘American century’ in clearly technologist terms and McCarthyists were denouncing modernist art as subversive of the ‘American Way’, Newman wrote in 1942 that art which glorified US life, particularly in regionalist guise, resembled ‘fascist ideology’ by using ‘intensified nationalism, false patriotism, the appeal to race, the re-emphasis on the home and homey sentiments’.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, in 1946, when both liberals and conservatives were euphoric about the new superpower status of the US, Barnett Newman was of a different mind. Instead, he noted that ‘we are living in times of the greatest terror the world has known’.<sup>99</sup>

Against this post-war historical backdrop in 1947, Newman published an essay, ‘The Ideographic Picture’, for an exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery of recent work by Hans Hofmann, Boris Margo, Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Theodoros Stamos and Clyfford Still. He remarked in his essay that it was time ‘to make clear the community of intention’ motivating this group of artists, ‘who are not abstract painters although working in what is known as the abstract style’.<sup>100</sup> True to his own anarchist concept of human nature, and its belief in the superiority of unordered ‘spontaneity’ (with all that this implies about the ‘natural goodness’ of people, as opposed to the Marxist view that humanity has a natural *potential* for goodness), Newman claimed that, ‘spontaneous and emerging from several points’, there had arisen ‘a new force in American painting that is the modern counterpart of the primitive art impulse’.<sup>101</sup> As did all the other Abstract Expressionists on various occasions, Newman specifically underlined three aspects of this art, each of

96 Liebling 1983, pp. 24–5.

97 Cox 1982, p. 77. For a more general discussion of anarchism, including its diverse tendencies, see the following: Joll 1980 and Guérin 1979 (Introduction by Noam Chomsky).

98 Newman 1971 [1942], p. 35.

99 Newman 1970 [1946], p. 70.

100 Newman 1984 [1947], pp. 550–1.

101 Ibid.

which contradicted precepts of formalist criticism: (1) that their aim was *not* 'to renounce the living world for the meaningless materialism of design'; (2) that they were not concerned with 'pure art' along with 'its overload of pseudo-scientific truths'; and (3) that this art was not about pleasing form, but rather about 'the hard, black chaos that is death, or the grayer, softer chaos that is tragedy'.<sup>102</sup>

Later in 1947, Newman published an eloquent essay, entitled 'The First Man was an Artist', in which he penned the most lengthy rejoinder by any Abstract Expressionist to the ideology of scientism. Significantly, this critique of scientism was done in the name of modern science, as well as on behalf of human progress, so that it would be erroneous to argue that Newman was simply promoting a species of irrationalism. Rather, he was pointing out, as did Adorno and Horkheimer in 1944, that science – for all its immense potential to contribute to human advances – was in fact currently being reified in such a way as to aid the exploitation of humanity. Similarly, Newman was not rejecting reason, but rather arguing for a genuine redefinition of it in terms that went beyond mere instrumentality to encompass human self-realisation through disalienated labour and aesthetic acts:

Shall, we artists quarrel with those who need to wait for the weights of scientific proof to believe in poetry? ... In the last sixty years, we have seen mushroom a vast cloud of 'sciences' in the fields of culture ... Why the invasion? ... Has science, in its attempt to dominate all realms of thought, been driven willy nilly to act politically? ... To accomplish this expansion, the scientist abandoned the revolutionary act ... So intense is the reverence for this symbol, scientific method, that it has become the new theology ... it has overwhelmed the original, ecstasy of scientific quest, scientific inquiry ... [which] was validity because the question is basic for the attainment of descriptive knowledge and permits a proper integration between its quest, the question *what* constantly maintained, and its tool, mathematics or logic, for the discovery of its answer.<sup>103</sup>

From this excellent discussion of the reification of science (which so clearly relates to Herbert Marcuse's explication in 1964 of how 'one-dimensional thought' had gained ascendancy in the West),<sup>104</sup> Newman went on to defend

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Newman 1947, pp. 57–8.

<sup>104</sup> Marcuse 1964, pp. 146 ff.

the impulse toward aesthetic development as an elemental realisation of human nature that had become unjustly suppressed in late capitalism. Just as the supposedly 'ideal' order and rules of Classical art came to signify alienation through scientism, so Newman's deep sympathy for 'primitive art' unquestionably disclosed the avant-garde character of Abstract Expressionism. For, as Poggioli has noted, avant-garde alienation insistently features the call for a 'clean cultural slate' whereby human history can be placed on a new foundation for future development that more justly accommodates humanity's intellectual potential as well as its material needs.<sup>105</sup> Post-war US society, then, was considered culpable because it structurally denied the aesthetic realisation intrinsic to disalienated human development. Thus, art could never be reducible to the instrumental uses or practical concerns then overdetermining all values within the US. To this, Newman said:

the job of the artist is not to discover truth, but to fashion it ... What was the first man? ... undoubtedly he was an artist ... the aesthetic act always precedes the social one ... the necessity for dream is stronger than any utilitarian need ... The human in language is literature, not communication ... Even the animal makes a futile attempt at poetry ... *His [humanity's] behavior had its origin in his artistic nature ...*

*In our inability to live the life of a creator can be found the meaning of the fall of man [my italics].* It was a fall from the good, rather than the abundant life. And it is precisely here that the artist today is striving for a closer approach to the truth concerning original man ... What is the explanation of the seemingly insane drive of man to be painter and poet if it is not an act of defiance against man's fall and an assertion that he return to the Adam of the Garden of Eden.<sup>106</sup>

In this passage and elsewhere, Newman gave a distinctly anarchist account of art history. For him, the artistic process was both independent of social labour and inherent to human nature (while for Marx, on the other hand, aesthetic acts were interdependent with labour and sociality, as well as grounded in human potentiality).<sup>107</sup> Precisely because Newman placed art in a dichotomous relation with social developments, he sometimes transvalued alienation from society into an alienation from sociality as such (which is why some of his

105 Poggioli, 1974 [1962], pp. 54–5.

106 Newman 1947, pp. 59–60.

107 See, for example, Marx 1970 [1857–59], pp. 108–9. See also Geras 1983, pp. 59 ff.



pronouncements were existentialist in tone). This conflation of discontent at a certain moment in history with the rejection of history in any progressive sense is a common failing of anarchist thought, which in turn leads to an apocalyptic view of change rather than to a concept for the revolutionary transformation of the existing order. It is this total opposition of anarchists to the established system that surfaced in Newman's denunciation of existing politics *per se* – a position which some art historians have erroneously interpreted as an 'apolitical' attitude towards the post-war developments.<sup>108</sup>

Nowhere were Newman's anarchist views of 'spontaneous' art, in addition to his apocalyptic belief in the end of history, more clearly present than in his famous text of 1948, 'The Sublime is Now'. Classical beauty, because of its demand for rational precision along with its dependence on a set of rules first codified in Greece, was seen as a barrier to 'man's natural desire in the arts' for self-realisation.<sup>109</sup> Hegel and Kant, whom Newman said discussed the sublime less successfully than Edmund Burke, subordinated artistic production to classical beauty, 'thus creating a range of hierarchies in a set of relationships to reality that is completely formal'.<sup>110</sup> In rejecting the 'fetish of quality' resulting from the restriction of art to 'perfect form', Newman asserted, 'The impulse of modern art was the desire to destroy beauty'.<sup>111</sup> Yet all earlier European avant-garde movements, according to Newman, had failed to achieve a definitive rupture with this classical reification of form, because the Cubists, Dadaists, et al., were caught in 'the grip of the *rhetoric* of exaltation'.<sup>112</sup> As such, they accomplished only a 'transfer of values instead of creating a new vision'.<sup>113</sup> (Implicit in Newman's critique, however, is the implausible belief in a 'natural' form of aesthetic communication unmediated by 'artificial' rhetoric.)

What radically distinguished the Abstract Expressionists' concern with the sublime, Newman claimed, was that for them classical beauty was not an issue either to affirm or negate. Instead of becoming another chapter within art history, these new artists supposedly left art history by 'reasserting man's natural desire for the exalted' in opposition to 'the tawdry, the picayune, the brutish'.<sup>114</sup> In this way, the painters of the sublime emptied painting of formal problems and technical issues, because 'The image we produce is the self-

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108 As is the case in Guilbaut 1983, p. 70.

109 Newman 1948, p. 51.

110 Ibid.

111 Newman 1948, p. 52.

112 Ibid.

113 Ibid.

114 Newman 1948, p. 53 and p. 57.

evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history'.<sup>115</sup>

Statements by five other artists – Kurt Seligman, Robert Motherwell, A.D.B. Sylvester, Nicolas Calas and John Stephan – also appeared with the one by Newman, in the journal called *Tiger's Eye*. All of these other essays correlated a use of the sublime with a deep alienation from the present. The closest complement to Newman's position, though, can be found in Robert Motherwell's essay, 'A Tour of the Sublime'. It is here in 1948 that Motherwell, though a democratic socialist or perhaps social-democrat, most approached the radical tone of Newman's anarchism. As Motherwell observed:

A true history of modern art will take account of its innumerable concrete rejections ... Suppose we assume that, despite defaults and confusions, modern art succeeded in *ridding us of the glory of conquerors and politicians, that it became, though 'understood' only by a minority, a people's art, a peculiarly modern humanism*, that its tactics in relation to the general human situation were those of gentle, strong, humane men *defending their values with intelligence and ingenuity against the property-loving world*. [my italics]

One might say that it is only the most inhuman professions in modern society that permit the agent to behave nicely in everyday life and to regard the world with a merry and well-glassed eye ... [yet] painting becomes Sublime when the artist transcends his personal anguish, when he projects in the midst of a shrieking world an expression of living and its end that is silent and ordered ... *all of us must reject the Sublime in the social sense, in its association with institutional authority*. [my italics]<sup>116</sup>

In 1962, Newman further affirmed the anarchist intent of his art in conjunction with his political ideals. He spoke of his own painting as being 'spontaneous' and 'anti-anecdotal'.<sup>117</sup> The implications of these traits for his painting were its presumed negation of conventional ways of seeing, and its 'denial of dogmatic principles, its repudiation of all dogmatic life'.<sup>118</sup> He then observed that in the late 1940s, Harold Rosenberg had challenged him to explain what one of his paintings could possibly mean to the world. Newman's response was that if

<sup>115</sup> Newman 1948, p. 53.

<sup>116</sup> Motherwell 1948, pp. 47–8.

<sup>117</sup> Newman 1962, p. 87.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

Rosenberg and others 'could read it properly it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism. That answer still goes'.<sup>119</sup>

Nowhere else in his written oeuvre, however, did Barnett Newman so extensively interrelate his political views, social ideals and artistic concerns than in his exemplary Foreword to the 1968 edition of Peter Kropotkin's autobiography, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*. Newman left no doubt that from the 1930s through the 1960s, the anarchist ideals and political activism of Kropotkin were of central importance to his own life and art, Newman began this Foreword by complimenting the book's reissue 'at this moment of revolutionary ferment' and praised it at the expense of all other alternatives on the left (including Marxism), which he considered 'dogmatic'.<sup>120</sup> In declaring that it was no longer enough to voice opposition to the establishment. Newman stressed what he deemed the signal importance of Kropotkin's ideas for authentic revolutionary change. According to Newman, Kropotkin's indispensability came especially from his commitment to 'the autonomy of the Individual' and from his resolute opposition to 'all forms of domination'.<sup>121</sup> This meant that:

For him [Kropotkin] only spontaneous, self-organized communes, now fashionably known as participatory democracy, based on mutual aid and respect for each person's individuality and person, are practical and realistic ... He saw that all dogmatic systems, no matter how radical, are as much a tyranny as the State and he took a stand against all Establishments.

Kropotkin was deeply concerned with the *dehumanization which was happening as a result of the industrial revolution and the division of labour* [my italics]. His ideas, on the problems of integrating rural and urban life, his opposition to the division of labour, make him the precursor of all those who have theorized on the subject ... and would make possible the leisure for a creative life.<sup>122</sup>

In adding his own views to those of Kropotkin, Newman made some noteworthy points. He approved of ideas in the 1960s among student radicals, who believed that 'the pursuit of science' had become transformed into a 'trap set by the Establishment to submerge them in the technocracy that can only end in

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119 Ibid.

120 Newman 1984, p. 9.

121 Newman 1984, p. 11.

122 Newman 1984, p. 11 and p. 18.

total war'.<sup>123</sup> Newman related how in the 1940s he felt 'destroyed by established institutions'.<sup>124</sup> He acutely noted that 'only those people practise destruction and betrayal who hunger to accept completely the values of the Establishment'.<sup>125</sup> In positing that 'It's the Establishment that makes people predatory', Newman further declared 'only those are free who are free from the values of the Establishment. And that's what Anarchism is all about'.<sup>126</sup>

Concerning the relation of his anarchist ideas to his production of art, Newman summed it up well by outlining the views of his adversaries:

they cannot understand how anybody is able to make anything, particularly a work of art, spontaneously or directly – *a prima*. The idea that someone can make anything without planning, without making sketches upon sketches from which one renders a finished product, is incomprehensible to them. By the same token, the same intellectuals cannot understand the Anarchist idea of social spontaneity or the direct formation of social communities.<sup>127</sup>

Two concepts are particularly notable in this passage, especially insofar as they intersect with the views of other Abstract Expressionists. First, this declaration by Newman reaffirmed the artistic tendency within anarchist thought represented by Kropotkin (and at odds with the competing line put forth by Proudhon) that the anarchist was not concerned with a particular style of art, but with a specific mode of artistic production that was 'disalienated'.<sup>128</sup> Second, this new means of producing art drew in turn on a concept of human nature that involved both the belief in a human 'spontaneity' unregulated by repressive social institutions and the view (defended eloquently by Kropotkin in his famous biological concept of mutualism)<sup>129</sup> that a 'natural' consequence of allowing autonomous individualism would *not* be selfishness. Rather, the mutual creation of interdependent and egalitarian communities capable of accommodating individual spontaneity would 'naturally' emerge. In all of these respects, Newman's theory of art was in the tradition of nineteenth-century artists such as Pissarro, Seurat and Signac, all of whom were influenced

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<sup>123</sup> Newman 1984, p. 16.

<sup>124</sup> Newman 1984, p. 19.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Joll 1980, pp. 149–51.

<sup>129</sup> Kropotkin 1979 [1902], pp. 405–15.

by Kropotkin's particular definition of artistic autonomy. As Signac stated in a lecture from 1902 that was deeply grounded in Kropotkin's views:

The anarchist painter is not one who will show anarchist paintings, but one who without regard for lucre, without desire for reward, will struggle with all his individuality, with personal effort, against bourgeois and official conventions ... The subject is nothing, or at least only one part of the work of art ... when the eye is educated, the people will see something other than the subject in pictures. When the society we dream of exists, the workers freed from the exploiters who brutalize them, we will have time to think and to learn. They will appreciate the different qualities of the work of art.<sup>130</sup>

### Contradictions of Anarchism and Abstract Expressionism

Abstract Expressionism at its best signifies not only the social wholeness and improvisation embodied in artisanal traditions, both Western and non-Western, but also an implicit affirmation of what Newman explicitly advocated – the anarchist belief in natural 'spontaneity'. To the extent that it is based on a faith in socially unmediated, or 'direct', art, Abstract Expressionism raises questions about the degree to which this art, for all its reputed 'elitism', is in fact based on backward-looking populist assumptions that constitute impediments to a realisation of their otherwise genuinely progressive aims. Although Motherwell said of this art that 'it became, though "understood" only by a minority, a people's art',<sup>131</sup> an altogether different reception has more often been the fate of Abstract Expressionism. For while the formal sophistication of Abstract Expressionism along with its egalitarian intent clearly exempt this art from the charge of populism, some of the theoretical views on which Abstract Expressionism was based do not escape this criticism. Indeed, it was precisely the populist assumptions intrinsic to the theories of the Abstract Expressionists that ultimately led to a certain naïveté about the way society at large would 'naturally' interpret these hardly naïve art works.

One of the avenues for grappling with the misguided theoretical presuppositions of the sublime wing of Abstract Expressionism comes from an unlikely source. In criticising the historical failings of Tolstoyism (a populist position

130 Herbert, Robert and Eugenia 1960, p. 479. See also, Herbert, Eugenia 1961.

131 Motherwell 1948, p. 47.

with anarchist aspects), Lenin actually provided a point of departure for addressing certain theoretical contradictions of the Abstract Expressionists, particularly insofar as they are linked to anarchist traditions. Lenin demonstrated, for example, how Tolstoy's idealisation of the oppressed popular classes ultimately led from a commiseration with their history to an ahistorical adulation of them as they were. By considering the peasants 'naturally' superior to their oppressive landlords, Tolstoy came to praise the educational deprivations responsible for their 'spontaneous' simplicity. Thus, he failed to recognise that some of these 'natural virtues' were *partially* a result of the way the social order denied the intellectual potential of the peasantry to be otherwise.<sup>132</sup>

A notorious consequence of this populist admiration, which turned Russian peasants into infallible noble savages, was Tolstoy's book *What Is Art?* In this study, Tolstoy dismissed almost the entire history of the fine arts in the West, from Michelangelo through Beethoven (Jean-François Millet's paintings of peasants are among the few art works exempted), as 'naturally' incomprehensible to the majority of people, who were peasants.<sup>133</sup> In so concluding, Tolstoy made no allowance for the *potential* of the majority to learn far more than present circumstances allowed. Thus, he artificially limited the discussion of humanity's intellectual potential to what seemed the 'natural' abilities of the peasantry within an educationally deprived and demeaning system. Furthermore, Tolstoy's political desire to change these exploitative circumstances became less pronounced and his commitment to pacifism more so, as he decided against altering people whom he loved *as they were*.<sup>134</sup>

A somewhat different but still related problem with populism came to haunt Abstract Expressionism, particularly its sublime wing. By endorsing the anarchist view that people are naturally good, hence are most creative when they act as 'spontaneous' and heroic 'individuals', Newman, Rothko and Still increasingly transformed an alienation from modern society into an alienation from sociality as such. Since people freed from society's prejudices could 'naturally' understand sublime art, modern Western society – and indeed all other hierarchical state-run societies that had developed beyond the stage of communal organisation – precluded the presumed elemental understanding conveyed by their art works. This position is intrinsic to Newman's claim on behalf of his art and that of the other Abstract Expressionists that it 'can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history'.<sup>135</sup>

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132 Lenin 1963 [1911], pp. 51–3.

133 Tolstoy 1969, pp. 243–65.

134 Ibid.

135 Newman 1948, p. 53.

What further followed from their confusion of alienation from a certain moment in history with an alienation from all advanced historical progress was a paradoxical *need* for alienation *per se*.<sup>136</sup> As such, the demand for immediate freedom from alienation became paradoxically inverted into a feeling of freedom *through* alienation, because this alienation appeared to demonstrate how the Abstract Expressionists themselves were 'free' of the values of an unfree society. Consequently, the call of these artists for profound change was undermined by the nature of the change that they proposed – a change which went from seeming unlikely to being undesired. Contrary to Tolstoy, Newman and the others did not of course dismiss the Western fine arts as 'incomprehensible' to the populace. Yet very much like Tolstoy, the Abstract Expressionists became enamoured with their own alienation to the point of embracing the 'natural' conditions that necessitated sublime art. This understandable but self-contradictory view was eloquently conveyed by Mark Rothko when in 1947 he wrote: 'The unfriendliness of society to his activity is difficult for the artist to accept. Yet this very hostility can act as a lever for true liberation'.<sup>137</sup>

Nowhere does this paradoxical state of affairs (resulting from the perceived impasse between 'naturally' good people and an 'inherently' perverting society) find more extreme expression than in the ultra-anarchist judgments of Clyfford Still. These pronouncements are at one and the same time imminently apocalyptic and remotely possible. The primary reason for Still's increasingly bitter as well as isolating assessment was less personal misanthropy than the anarchist ideal of 'naturally' free behaviour – behaviour that he found ever more difficult to achieve as the years went by. It should perhaps be noted here that this viewpoint is opposed both to the capitalist faith in 'natural' selfishness and to the Marxist belief in human potentiality capable of realisation in various directions, depending on the social structure encountered. For Marxists, then, further appreciation of the merits of Abstract Expressionism would be based on progress *through* history, not on Still's implausible ideas of 'transcending' history altogether.

There are few if any parallels within Western art for the degree of alienation expressed by Clyfford Still both from the contemporary US and from Western history in general. Still's alienation was of such intensity that it permitted no solution, thus becoming what Brecht once labelled an alienation from which one does not return. Simultaneously, Still spoke of an inescapably totalitarian

136 Braun 1984, pp. 49–50. Barbara Braun, 'Freedom's Just Another Work ...' *The Village Voice*, 29 May 1984, pp. 49–50.

137 Rothko 1947–8, p. 84.

system in the US and also implied that somehow a few good people could escape its institutional reach, not to overturn the system but to avoid its otherwise unchecked authority.

Post-war society, then, was deemed without hope, except for a few individuals who could flourish on its margins by means of 'natural' virtues. It was in the bleakest terms that Still outlined the coordinates of contemporary life:

In the few directions we were able to look during the 1920s, whether to past cultures or the scientific, aesthetic, and social myths of our own, it was amply evident that in them lay few answers valid for insight or imagination ... Self-appointed spokesmen ... dumped upon us the combined and sterile conclusions of Western European decadence. For nearly a quarter of a century we stumbled and groped through the nightmare of its labyrinthine evasions ... No one was permitted to escape its fatalistic rituals – yet I, for one, refused to accept its ultimatums ... The omnivorousness of the totalitarian mind, however, demands a rigor of purpose and subtlety of insight from anyone who would escape incorporation ... semantically and ethically the corruption is complete.<sup>138</sup>

According to Still, the totalitarian system of the post-war US was maintained by a network of institutions (such as the regulatory strictures of museums as well as other 'authoritarian devices for social control')<sup>139</sup> and by pervasive ideologies (such as 'shouting about individualism', formalist aesthetics with its 'superficial value of material', and the 'morbidity of the "objective position"').<sup>140</sup> A consequence of these institutions and ideologies was the reactionary reception of art they fostered. This situation was summarised by Still in strongly anti-hierarchical terms: 'behind these reactions is a body of history matured into dogma, authority, tradition. The totalitarian hegemony of this tradition I despise, its presumptions I reject. Its security is an illusion'.<sup>141</sup>

From here, Still went on to despair of how 'spontaneous' or unmediated reactions to his paintings would never be common, even as he maintained that such reactions were possible. Thus, in the name of pristine and natural values which he himself claimed had no hope of ascendancy in US society, Still denounced the ideology of narcissistic individualism as a corollary of totalitarianism. None the less, he observed that to 'achieve a purpose beyond

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<sup>138</sup> Still 1959, pp. 574–5.

<sup>139</sup> Still 1959, p. 515.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Still 1952, p. 21.



vanity, ambition, and remembrance' artists must do it alone and in solitude.<sup>142</sup> The contradictory relationship of individual to society, as described by Still, was sometimes one of almost complete predetermination by hegemonic values and at other times one of sublime autonomy in the face of impossible odds. The very impossibility of one set of circumstances thus capsized into its converse, which in turn became all the more exalted because of its own presumed immitigable state.

Caught in an impossible bind, the sublime artist simultaneously refused to propagandise for any position that advanced hierarchical values and yet had his or her position overwhelmed by these very same conventional, even totalitarian, values, because the public for the art was enmeshed in the system. Here, as elsewhere. Still's reliance on an anarchist position – with all that this implies about the belief in dichotomous relationships and monolithic structures, such as 'the state' – means that he (along with the other painters of the sublime) overlooked both internal contradictions within progressive art that allow for dialogical interchange, and intrinsic fissures within reactionary societies that always present progressive possibilities. The result is the untenable belief in an art without faults (it is not by chance that Still used the word 'Absolute' to praise his own paintings)<sup>143</sup> versus a society without virtues – a society that cannot be changed, but only renounced. As such, Still's position recalls less Kropotkin's critique of society, than Bakunin's demand for its annihilation, with complete destruction being seen as the highest form of creation.<sup>144</sup>

The impossibly paradoxical position in which Still located his art is clear enough when one examines his characterisation of museums, technology, science and viewer reception. In neo-Bakunist terms, Still proclaimed a faith in isolated autonomy that was extremist even by the standards of nineteenth-century anarchists:

By 1941, space and the figure in my canvases had been resolved into a total psychic entity ... My feeling of freedom was now absolute and infinitely exhilarating ... I'm not interested in illustrating my time ... Our age – it is of science – of mechanism – of power and death. I see no point in adding to its mammoth arrogance the compliment of graphic homage ... The sublime? A paramount consideration in my studies and work from my earliest student days. In essence it is most elusive of capture or definition

142 Still 1959, pp. 575–6.

143 Still 1963, p. 9.

144 Joll 1980, pp. 75–80.

... The values involved, however, permit no peace, and mutual resentment is deep when it is discovered that salvation cannot be bought. Demands for communication are both presumptuous and irrelevant. The observer usually will see what his fears and hopes and learning teach him to see. But if he can escape these demands that hold up a mirror to himself, then perhaps some of the implications of the work may be felt ... *It is the price one has to pay for clarity when one's means are honored only as an instrument of seduction or assault.* [my italics]<sup>145</sup>

Not only did Still claim that the very clarity of his paintings would render them unclear to the dogmatic, but also that this incomprehension would unfortunately aid the appropriation of his paintings. In addition, Still admitted of his works that their 'power for life' was hardly capable of overturning art world institutions, from existing museums to established criticism.<sup>146</sup> When writing about the appearance of his own paintings in an important exhibition at a leading museum, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Still again resorted to a rigid binary classification to describe the relationship between his work and the museum: 'The paradox manifest by the appearance of this work in an institution whose meaning and function must point in a direction opposite to that implied in the paintings – and my own life – was accepted. I believe it will not be resolved, but instead will be sharpened and clarified'.<sup>147</sup>

Similarly, Still was resigned to a dissident status within society, as opposed to any role in its transformation. This position emerged clearly enough in his dismissive attitude towards contemporary art criticism. Instead of engaging in a debate both about what was wrong *and* also right about the mainstream interpretation of his works, Still attempted rather implausibly to sequester his art works from a public discourse that he deemed unrelievedly totalitarian in nature. At one and the same time, his 'subversive' paintings were supposed to be on behalf of all humanity, yet needed to be guarded from most encounters with society while being discussed not at all in print. A letter of 1948 to Betty Parsons from Still demonstrated well the self-contradictory ideals following from an ultra-anarchist faith in the inherent autonomy of *engagé* art:

Please – and this is important, show them [my paintings] only to those who have some insight into the values involved, and allow no one to write

145 Still 1963, pp. 9–10 and Still 1952, pp. 21–2.

146 Still 1952, p. 22.

147 Still 1959, p. 574.

about them. NO ONE ... Men like Soby, Greenberg, Barr, etc ... are to be categorically rejected. And I no longer want them shown to the public at large, either singly or in a group.<sup>148</sup>

Far from being either an endorsement of Cold War liberalism or an embodiment of the 'vital centre', Still's position here – like that of all the other Abstract Expressionists whom Still represented in an extreme form – is indicative both of an opposition to post-war Western society and of a desire for an ideological position on the far margins of it. As such, the 'autonomous' position of Still and the other Abstract Expressionists reminds us of what E.J. Hobsbawm has observed about the inception of anarchism during the period after the revolutions of 1848. With its populist hatred of all governments as well as hierarchies, along with its ideal of 'naturally' autonomous communes, anarchism simultaneously represented a revolt of the pre-industrial past against the present and a distinctive manifestation of the present in its unwitting convergence with *laissez-faire* individualism.<sup>149</sup> (It is precisely this latter and only partial convergence which has led some scholars to confuse the position of the Abstract Expressionists with that of Cold War liberalism.)<sup>150</sup>

Because anarchist leaders such as Bakunin considered *any* political action within the established state to be a reactionary endorsement of this state (a position quite at odds with that of Marx and Engels, for example), the praxis of anarchists frequently vacillated between apocalyptic bomb-throwing aimed at exploding the status quo and the tactic of 'militant' abstentionism designed to discredit the existing order by refusing to vote (neither of which resulted in significant successes). It is with recourse to the all-or-nothing anarchist framework for praxis that we must discuss Barnett Newman's 1943 call for artists to reject 'an outmoded politics'.<sup>151</sup>

Anarchism had a strong appeal to nineteenth-century intellectuals and to post-war artists owing to its linkage of communal ownership in a remote past with a future millennium that will appear suddenly and without systematic planning on the Day of Revolution. In this way, anarchist thought invariably ignores the necessary historical developments, some of which are long term, whereby such a general emancipation of humanity would be feas-

148 Clyfford Still, Letter to Betty Parsons, March 20, 1948, Archives of American Art, Betty Parsons Papers, N: 68–72.

149 Hobsbawm 1975, pp. 175–7.

150 Guilbaut 1983.

151 Newman 1943.

ible.<sup>152</sup> Instead, anarchists opt for a 'spontaneous', hence also instantly non-hierarchical, movement whereby the 'unchanging' suffering of centuries will be quickly rescinded once and for all. Few people have so incisively illuminated the theoretical shortcomings of anarchists as did Friedrich Engels in his discussion of how the Spanish anarchists aided, then undermined, progressive forces during the revolution of 1873 in Spain. (It was this revolutionary upheaval that, as Stephen Eisenman has shown, gave the Impressionists their first name, 'The Intransigents'.)<sup>153</sup> In detailing how electoral abstentionism coupled with demands for an immediate dissolution of the state led to a tragic defeat of the left by a numerically inferior right wing that nevertheless understood the merits of centralisation at certain moments in history, Engels exposed the dangerous inadequacy of any 'spontaneous' strategy for social transformation.<sup>154</sup>

At times when there is little opportunity for achieving structural change, Engels noted, it is often possible to convince people to attack an 'abstract state' that is everywhere and nowhere, hence one that need not defend itself.<sup>155</sup> This is a self-defeating way of presenting the revolutionary process to those who are easily disheartened, since they can take consolation in pointing out the omnipotence of their foe. Conversely, in times when there are possibilities for change, as was true in Spain during 1873, progressive forces are confronted by an anarchist alternative that renders failure 'inevitable'. On the one hand, there was a systematic mandate by a small but unified ultra-right, while on the other hand there was a 'programmeless' and 'non-hierarchical', if also quite large, anarchist tendency. In siding with the latter tendency – as opposed to a strategy that distanced itself from both of these positions – the progressive forces chose a 'spontaneity' that led first to the disorganisation, then to the disintegration of their own movement, thus ushering in centralised control by the much smaller but better unified and far more hierarchical forces of reaction.<sup>156</sup>

Another theoretical failing, as well as concrete historical flaw, of anarchism involves its concept of the relationship between nature and society – a relationship that is implicit in any movement committed to the sublime in nature. In rightly arguing for a more just society, anarchists seek to free people from human bondage yet overlook the possibility of freeing people from enslavement to nature. Just as the Abstract Expressionists, like the anarchists, opposed the capitalist fallacy of dominating nature (which is also a basic precept of the

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152 Berger 1965, pp. 22–3.

153 Eisenman 1986, pp. 51–60.

154 Engels 1971 [1873].

155 Engels 1971 [1873], p. 8.

156 Engels 1971 [1873], pp. 22–4.

scientism, technologism and Western modernisation that the Abstract Expressionists criticised), so both the anarchists and the Abstract Expressionists fell into the fallacy of accepting the domination of people by nature, which is a fundamental supposition of any aesthetic of the sublime.

A more plausible and progressive extension of the critique of scientism would not end with an inverted variation on unqualified naturalism, but would lead instead to a *new integration* of technology and nature, of science and humanity, within a post-capitalist order that presupposed neither scientific instrumentalism nor natural determinism. This new order would be predicated on a dynamic inter-change between science and nature, rather than on the ascendancy of one over the other. While the Abstract Expressionists moved in the direction of such a dialectic, with their critique of scientism, these artists also succumbed to what Newman and Rothko called a 'fear of nature' that acknowledged its power over any historical advances by humanity.<sup>157</sup> Yet profoundly progressive developments by humanity, precisely because they would not respect, challenge or ignore the forces of nature, would not need to be fearful of a nature whose power was afforded due respect, thus putting such forces on the side of technology and society. An historical trajectory along these lines would make technological success directly proportional to ecologically sound planning, all of which implies a pervasive deference for natural cycles as well as the forces of nature.<sup>158</sup>

Finally, while the consistent efforts of Newman and other Abstract Expressionists to be *engagé* through their art is undeniable, some of their claims on behalf of the nature of this engagement are obviously untenable. It was hardly plausible, for example, when Newman contended that many of the Abstract Expressionists had transcended all conventional artistic rhetoric as well as traditional visual imagery to arrive at 'spontaneous', hence 'self-evident' and 'natural' revelations of the sublime. Just as few if any viewers have experienced the sublime before these paintings without first knowing what the concept means historically, so Newman, Rothko, Motherwell, Still and Gottlieb all drew substantially if also very subtly on the formal values associated with nineteenth-century European paintings that dealt with the sublime.<sup>159</sup>

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157 Newman 1970, pp. 70–1.

158 Such an analysis is found, for example, in Engels 1984 [1876], pp. 358–68.

159 The formal tradition of Abstract Expressionism has been clarified by Robert Rosenblum and Lawrence Alloway, while the rhetorical conventions of Abstract Expressionism have been discussed by Ann Gibson and Richard Schiff. See, for example, Rosenblum 1975, pp. 195 ff., and Gibson 1987, pp. 64–93.

This assimilation of previous visual rhetoric and concomitant use of an established medium – as opposed to any ‘spontaneous’ images entirely disconnected from previous conventions in art – has been conclusively demonstrated by several art historians. Since the visual language of the Abstract Expressionists was culturally mediated by earlier visual languages and the ideological values that emerged with them, the art of the sublime painters hardly originated in ‘natural’ utterances outside history or society. Consequently, we cannot stop with Newman’s explanation of how this anti-capitalist, socially alienated and humanly affirmative art arose as the ‘spontaneous’ outpouring of ‘autonomous individuals’. Instead, we must subject these latter views to a sustained critique. Only then can we understand the process whereby art opposed to multi-national capitalism could sometimes be used to promote ideological tendencies interrelated with this very same system.

## Abstract Expressionism and Third World Art: A Post-Colonial Approach to ‘American’ Art

Just as modern art stands as an island of revolt in the narrow stream of Western aesthetics, [so] the primitive art traditions stand apart as authentic aesthetic accomplishments that flourished without benefit of European history ...<sup>1</sup>

There is an answer in these works to all those who assume that modern abstract art is the esoteric exercise of a snobbish élite, for among these simple peoples, abstract art was the normal, well-understood dominant tradition. Shall we say that modern man has lost the ability to think on so high a level?<sup>2</sup>

BARNETT NEWMAN (1946)

...

In the course of the last fifty years the painters who freed themselves from the necessity of representation discovered wholly new fields of form-construction and expression ... That kind of view made possible the appreciation of many kinds of old art and of the arts of distant peoples – primitive, historic, colonial, Asiatic and African, as well as European – arts which had not been accessible in spirit because it was thought that *true art had to show a degree of conformity to nature and a mastery of representation which had developed for the most part in the West ...* [Now these non-Eurocentric arts] were seen as existing on the same plane of creativeness and expression as ‘civilised’ Western Art [my italics].<sup>3</sup>

MEYER SCHAPIRO (1957)

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1 Newman 1946.

2 Ibid.

3 Schapiro 1978 (1957), p. 215.

In many parts of the world, Abstract Expressionism signifies the ascendancy to cultural pre-eminence of United States art.<sup>4</sup> Yet it is also viewed with disfavour or indifference by the majority of people in the US whose culture this art presumably represents.<sup>5</sup> Equally paradoxical is the relation of Abstract Expressionism to contemporary Latin American art. At a time when US intervention throughout the Americas has intensified, the receptivity of progressive Latin American artists to certain aspects of post-war US art (even as these same artists vigorously oppose US hegemony) raises new questions about the nature of art produced in the US since 1945.

At present, the literature on Abstract Expressionism is becoming circumscribed by a new orthodoxy that treats this art as a monolithic expression of Cold War ideology, whether the artists themselves intended this or not.<sup>6</sup> For these authors, then, Abstract Expressionism was either conceived to be, or has since become, little more than a conduit of the cultural imperialism that helps sustain US dominance in the Americas. Ironically, however, there are major artists and intellectuals from revolutionary movements (such as in Cuba and in Nicaragua), who view Abstract Expressionism in quite different terms, as decentred vocabularies of visual conventions capable of development in a variety of directions. And in some of these cases, Cuban and Nicaraguan artists have actually drawn on post-war US art to advance their own national self-determination culturally in the face of the foreign intervention and ideological underdevelopment promoted by Western capital in concert with the US government. It is precisely this contradictory use of US art by progressive Latin Americans that has led Coco Fusco to warn North American leftists against seeing such art as 'necessarily a symptom of dependency'.<sup>7</sup>

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4 This article is based on presentations that I have made at the State University of New York, College at Cortland, at Universität Bremen (West Germany) in June 1988, and at Occidental College, Los Angeles, on 26 January 1989. I am grateful to many people for responding either to these presentations or to the present article, so that I was forced to develop my arguments much further. Among the people to whom I ought thanks in this regard are Colleen Kattau, Rudolf Baranik, Stephen Eisenman, David James, Andrew Hemingway, Franz-Joachim Verspohl, Gerardo Mosquera of Cuba, Raul Quintanilla of Nicaragua, Michael Müller, and of course the students at SUNY – Cortland (particularly Vivian Rehberg) and at Universität Bremen (above all, Werner Fischer).

5 Kilman 1985, p. 3.

6 This is the case, for example, in Guilbaut 1983. Nonetheless, it must be noted that this book contains some very important research and many significant insights. In short, Guilbaut's study is a valuable one for many reasons.

7 Fusco 1988, Introduction.



The complex irony of this inter-relationship is obvious enough if we simply compare an all-over painting by Jackson Pollock with a painting by René Portocarrero of Cuba or an award-winning 1986 work by Boanerges Cerrato of Nicaragua. One of the new generation of painters in this Central American country until he died unexpectedly in 1988 while still in his thirties, Cerrato drew on an inter-image dialogue more related to North American Abstract Expressionism than to the Spanish *arte informal* that continues to be influential on many of the older painters now active in Nicaragua. As Nicaraguan critic Luis Morales has observed, the visual vocabulary and formal syntax of Cerrato's paintings were intended to foster 'spectator participation' in the constitution of the work's meaning.<sup>8</sup> While Cerrato's work, which was given a prize in 1986 by the Sandinista Union of Cultural Workers (ASTC), certainly recalls compositionally the all-over drip paintings of Pollock, this triptych is also marked by more measured, no less densely interlaced brushwork. The anguished sensibility expressed by Pollock's all-over through skeins of coiled paint is displaced in Cerrato's all-over by fluent, non-frenetic brushstrokes that notably shift the signification of his work.

Instead of the forceful, even harried human movements of which Pollock's lines are well-composed traces, Cerrato's artwork evokes the fluency of organic motion, the density of undomesticated flora. As such, to many Nicaraguan viewers the painting by Cerrato signifies the organically intermeshed outlines of impenetrable tropical terrain. The visual result is a two-dimensional effect not unlike that associated with the imbricated space of campesino primitivist paintings, such as those by Alejandro Guevara or Olivia Silva, both of whom are from the well-known Solentiname School.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, Boanerges Cerrato's triptych permits a discursive interchange between the Abstract Expressionism of post-war, industrialised North American culture and a type of art connected to the experience of non-Western campesino cultures, which have yet to be extensively industrialised. Here as elsewhere in revolutionary Nicaraguan art, there is a sophisticated dialogical enjoinder of Western culture with Third World culture, of high art with popular traditions.

An intermediary step toward the above synthesis can be found in an adroit painting by Boanerges Cerrato that once hung in a hall of the National School of Plastic Arts in Managua. This earlier work is an all-over drip painting with brushstrokes that quite self-consciously echo those of Pollock. Yet in the upper register of this painting, where the all-over stops, are trees sprouting forth, so

8 Morales 1986, pp. 420–1.

9 For an extended discussion of the Solentiname School, see: Craven 1989b, pp. 72–106.

that the all-over suddenly represents the gnarled forms and twisted movements of undominated nature – a nature that in turn signifies anti-imperialist values in contemporary Nicaraguan culture. Such a reading of unbroken nature as a force for national liberation and against foreign intervention is found in much of the recent literature there, as for example in the famous testimonio of Omar Cabezas or in the ‘geographical’ poetry of Ernesto Cardenal.<sup>10</sup>

As all these unwieldy comparisons (and many others we shall explore) demonstrate, it is quite simplistic to view post-war North American art, such as Abstract Expressionism, as a cohesive and self-consistent expression of the ideology of the ruling class in the US, and even more specifically as the seamless claims of Cold War liberalism concomitant with the predominance of US multinational capitalism throughout the Americas. Instead, we must adopt a more sophisticated conceptual framework that allows us to analyse what Mikhail Bakhtin has termed the ‘dialogical’ nature of art.<sup>11</sup> According to this model, an artwork is not a unified whole, but rather an open-ended site of contestation wherein various cultural practices from different classes and ethnic groups are temporarily combined. Any visual language in the arts is thus understood as a locus for competing cultural traditions along with conflicting ideological values. Hence, any artwork, regardless of how much it is publicly identified with one class or society, signifies not only for the dominant sectors but also for the dominated classes and different class fractions. Consequently, artwork such as that by the Abstract Expressionists should be approached as an uneasy synthesis – more or less stable but not conclusively resolved – of hegemonic values with subordinate ideological tendencies, out of which broader signification is constructed.

In keeping with this dialogical conceptual framework, every visual language is not merely a tool for political struggle, but by its very nature a location of ongoing political conflict. All visual languages are unavoidably shaped by cultural, ethnic, and class tensions, so that they are necessarily decentred, to quote Macherey.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, art does not simply reflect, embody, or parallel any one ideology, but rather signifies various ideological values, which are in alliance with each other, none to the complete exclusion of all others. Unlike a reflectionist view of cultural practices that always reduces these values to a passive, largely *reproductive* role in history, a dialogical analysis treats the production of art as a fundamental means whereby a society materially constructs

10 Cardenal 1986, pp. 12–13. Also see: Craven 1989, pp. 140–55.

11 Bakhtin 1984 [1965].

12 Macherey 1978 [1966].

itself through the absorption, then reconstitution of earlier visual languages (which are nonetheless capable of being extended in divergent directions). In this way, art, like language, is addressed as a material force that unevenly shapes the social sphere no less significantly than economic or political developments and sometimes in contradistinction to them. (In this respect, a dialogical analysis recalls what Marx termed the 'law of uneven development' among various spheres of society.)<sup>13</sup>

It will be demonstrated in this article, then, that post-1945 US art has not been predicated on the reductive process of 'medium purification' outlined by formalists like Clement Greenberg, much less on escapist 'apoliticism' or ethnocentric values. Rather, post-1945 US art has emerged from an expansive and highly 'impure' process of cultural convergences in which Third World artistic practices – Native North American, Latin American, Afro-American, and South Pacific in origin – have been enjoined with the European artistic traditions so ethnocentrically privileged by formalist apologists for US art. Consequently, a sustained critique of Abstract Expressionism will not disclose a unified, white 'American' (and ultimately Eurocentric) style leading inevitably to the 'triumph' of US culture.

Instead, such a deconstruction of Abstract Expressionism will divulge multiple cultural practices, both Western and non-Eurocentric, which, while mediated by US institutions, nonetheless provide a multivalent and polycentric legacy replete with various possibilities. Furthermore, some of these cultural possibilities of North American art, particularly those originating outside of Western cultural practices, contradict profoundly the dominant logic of US society that post-war US art is often said to 'reflect'. Abstract Expressionism, for example, has not only served but also subverted US hegemony in the Americas, because this North American visual vocabulary has provided noteworthy points of development for progressive artists from the 'other Americas', whose work exists in fundamental opposition to the present hierarchy of relations that sustain US dominance throughout Latin America. This process does not entail simply the 'influence' of Abstract Expressionism on dependent cultural traditions, but rather the critical reclamation by Latin American artists of artistic practices that the Abstract Expressionists earlier borrowed from a variety of non-Western, Third World cultures. Nor is it unimportant politically that the Abstract Expressionists drew extensively on 'foreign' experiences and 'un-American' culture at the very time in history when the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities was terrorising the US with tales of foreign sub-

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13 Eagleton 1976, pp. 10–11.

version and anti-American conspiracies, while the Truman Doctrine of 1947 initiated an unprecedented military assault by the US on Third World liberation movements.<sup>14</sup>

In the 1930s, Meyer Schapiro rejected the possibility of any national 'American Art' as an insidious idea.<sup>15</sup> He observed that such a claim would constitute, at best, a veil of fictitious unity in a highly stratified society with considerable racial, class, and gender divisions. Owing to these circumstances, Schapiro noted that the designation of 'American Art' would simply publicise the singular interests of those at the top of the economic structure, who, because of attendant political power in a comparably disproportionate amount, would simply speak for everyone else, as if there really were a homogeneous national culture. As subsequent events attest, Schapiro's point was both quite accurate and largely ignored. Indeed, Clement Greenberg, for one, has even insisted that the term 'Abstract Expressionism' be replaced by the title 'American-Type Painting'.<sup>16</sup>

### McCarthyism as Western Ethnocentrism

As has been recently demonstrated, the Abstract Expressionists gained neither widespread public acceptance nor genuine market success before the mid-1950s.<sup>17</sup> This monetary assimilation was after the period of their most important work and during the time when the Abstract Expressionist manner (or 'Tenth Street Touch') was becoming institutionalised by a second generation of artists who were more Eurocentric artistically and less to the left politically than the first generation (Rudolf Baranik is an important exception here).<sup>18</sup> For all this increasing acclaim, 'the first signs of Abstract Expressionism's market success came [only] soon after Pollock's death in 1956'.<sup>19</sup>

If the market for Abstract Expressionism was unimpressive until the mid-1950s, this group's position with respect to the dominant political forces of the decade of 1946–56, that is, the McCarthy years, was even more difficult, if also highly paradoxical. Even as the Abstract Expressionists started receiving

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14 Barnet 1964. Also see, Chomsky and Hermann 1979.

15 Schapiro 1936, pp. 38–41.

16 Greenberg 1996a [1955], pp. 217–35.

17 Robson 1985, pp. 19–23.

18 Sandler 1978, pp. 18–20. For Baranik's dissenting position, see: Craven 1988.

19 Robson 1985, p. 23.

critical praise within the artworld, along with notoriety in the mass media, modernist art was subjected to a powerful rhetorical assault by members of the U.S. Congress. In turn, these inflammatory attacks resulted in open, if intermittent government censorship of modernist art through 1957. In 1949, for example, Congressman George A. Dondero fulminated on the floor of the US House of Representatives against modern art.

In the speech entitled 'Modern Art Shackled to Communism', Dondero claimed in blatantly ethnocentric terms that modernist art undermined so-called 'American values'. Here it is important to realise that in a certain sense, McCarthyism was more about ethnocentrism than about 'anti-Communism':

I call the roll of infamy without claim that my list is all-inclusive: dadaism, futurism, constructivism, suprematism, cubism, expressionism, surrealism, and abstractionism. All these 'isms' are of foreign origin, and truly should have no place in American art ... Expressionism aims to destroy by aping the primitive and the insane ... Abstractionism aims to destroy by the creation of brainstorm ... Surrealism aims to destroy by the denial of reason ... We are now face to face with the intolerable situation, where public schools, colleges, and universities, art and technical schools, invaded by a horde of foreign art manglers, are selling to our young men and women a subversive doctrine of 'isms'. Communist-inspired and Communist-connected, which have one common, boasted goal – the destruction that awaits if this Marxist trail is not abandoned.<sup>20</sup>

Revealingly, there was an almost complete absence of opposition to Dondero from liberals in the Congress (Senator Jacob Javits was a noteworthy exception). Instead of pointing out the utter ignorance with which Dondero referred to Marxism, Communism, or modernity in the arts, the most prominent liberal respondents in the artworld, like critic Alfred Barr of the Museum of Modern Art, took another tack. They allowed these hysterical attacks on the political left to go unchallenged and argued that avant-garde art (contrary to everything we know about the European avant-garde's call for both a radical transvaluation of society and a critique of the institutional affiliation of art)<sup>21</sup> was 'apolitical' and, as such, purportedly an expression of individual 'free-

20 Dondero 1968 [1949], pp. 496–7.

21 Bürger 1984 [1974].

dom'.<sup>22</sup> In this way, Barr delineated a major reason for the creation of formalist criticism, 'cleansed' as it was of political contumacy: it was a way of promoting Abstract Expressionism that denied both its insurgent cultural practices and its recalcitrant opposition to capitalism (all of which I have discussed at considerable length elsewhere).<sup>23</sup> Nor is it fortuitous that Clement Greenberg, the formalist critic who interpretatively purged Abstract Expressionism of its dissident politics, was an active McCarthyist who won praise for his 'anti-Communism' from Congressman Dondero in *The Congressional Records* (1951).<sup>24</sup>

In an eloquent public lecture of 1944, Robert Motherwell correlated the role of avant-garde art with that of democratic socialism and expressed deep alienation from the dominant economic system as well as its concomitant ideological values. For him, the advanced artist was 'a spiritual being in a property-loving world'.<sup>25</sup> In addition, Motherwell's *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, his longest and most important series, was begun in 1947–9 as a tribute to the leftist government defeated by fascism a decade earlier. This was shortly before the House Un-American Activities Committee of the US Congress publicly grouped the Spanish Refugee Relief Committee with other 'front' organisations for the Communist Party, thus branding sympathy for the defeated Spanish left as an 'anti-American' as well as subversive act.<sup>26</sup> Undeterred, Motherwell continued working on this lament for the Spanish left throughout the 1950s, even though President Eisenhower signed a friendship treaty with the fascist dictator Franco, which sent US troops to Spain in 1953 as a bulwark against 'Communism'.

Similarly, in 1955, historian William Seitz, a friend and confidant of the Abstract Expressionists, would write in what was the first book-length study of the movement that 'hostility and social frustration are implicit, too, in the violent impastos which led to Jackson Pollock's abandonment of the brush'.<sup>27</sup> Concerning this internal distancing from mainstream America, Seitz stated that these artists lived according to values vastly different from those of a 'huge middle-class world of property'.<sup>28</sup> This interpretation of the group's aims was

22 Alfred Barr 1952, pp. 22–3, 28–30.

23 Craven 1990, pp. 71–102 (the previous chapter of this book).

24 Mathews 1976, p. 776.

25 Motherwell 1944, p. 10.

26 House Un-American Activities Committee, CONGRESSIONAL RECORD, 81st Congress, 1st Session, 1949, p. 11586.

27 Seitz 1983 [1955], p. 8.

28 Seitz 1983 [1955], p. 143.

corroborated by Barnett Newman throughout his career, as for example when he maintained that: 'It's the establishment that makes people predatory ... Only those are free who are free from the values of the Establishment.'<sup>29</sup>

Thus, at a time when the globalisation of US values was in conflict with an authentic internationalism and concomitant multiculturalism that contravened this new trajectory of power, the Abstract Expressionists generally sided with the latter position. Both ultra-right McCarthyists and Cold War liberals repeatedly extolled the superiority of what was supposedly 'American'.<sup>30</sup> And while Clement Greenberg and other Cold War apologists for Pollock might refer to his art in 1947 as 'radically American',<sup>31</sup> Pollock himself earlier claimed that 'the basic problems of contemporary painting are independent of any one country'.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, while Greenberg et al., increasingly spoke of the superiority of North American art over French art (never mind elsewhere), Motherwell wrote of their problem as one of equalling the modernist movement elsewhere, and Barnett Newman called on North American artists to attain the same level of accomplishment as Native Americans and pre-colonial cultures in the South Pacific, both of which he deemed superior in their art to that by Europeans.<sup>33</sup> As Newman wrote in 1946 of Northwest Coast art:

There is an answer to all those who assume that modern abstract art is the esoteric exercise of a snobbish élite, for among these simple peoples, abstract art was the normal, well-understood dominant tradition. Shall we say that modern man has lost the ability to think on so high a level?<sup>34</sup>

About Jackson Pollock, whom he met only after the 1930s (when many scholars erroneously claim that Pollock became 'apolitical'), Motherwell has said of their friendship in the mid-1940s:

I have always detested chauvinism [...] and one of the first things that impressed me about Pollock when he did begin to talk was his lack of chauvinism ... (Pollock in fact had very leftist political views that seemingly had little to do with his art.) Rather than the question of

<sup>29</sup> Newman 1968, p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> Cox 1982, pp. 68 ff.

<sup>31</sup> Greenberg 1986b [1947], pp. 160–70. See the superb critique of Greenberg's nationalistic prose in Cox 1982, pp. 142 ff.

<sup>32</sup> Pollock 1982 [1944], p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> Newman 1970, pp. 70–1.

<sup>34</sup> Newman 1968.

'Americanism', Pollock was much more eager to talk about a piece John Graham had written [on Mediterranean art].<sup>35</sup>

One of the most fascinating (and until now unnoticed) links between Latin American anti-imperialism and New York Abstract Expressionism involves Ad Reinhardt, who was a lifelong political activist on the left. As a friend and correspondent of priest Thomas Merton, Reinhardt lamented the ascendancy of what he called 'Pepsi-Cola culture', as well as other related developments in the Third World. In some of the last letters between Thomas Merton and himself, reference was made to a Central American priest (Ernesto Cardenal) who was planning to establish a parish based on egalitarian principles. In a letter to Ad Reinhardt (12 January 1964), Thomas Merton wrote:

I hide my head from the American hubris that starts and will start wars and violence all over the place, I go back to be dean of the small calligraphy and weep for the peace race. Now its flags in Panama, and I got a friend [Ernesto Cardenal] just through telling me of peaceful Indians on islands around there [Solentiname in Lake Nicaragua], etc. Bah. Fooey on the pale faces.<sup>36</sup>

Cardenal did indeed establish such a Nicaraguan island community that lasted from 1965 until 1977, when it was destroyed by Somoza's National Guard for 'subversion'.<sup>37</sup> In discussing this island community, which has been quite influential on developments in the arts in Nicaragua since the revolution in 1979 (and continues to be even after the elections in February 1990), Cardenal has always referred to Reinhardt's close friend, Father Thomas Merton, as 'el Fundador espiritual de esta pequeña comunidad de Solentiname'.<sup>38</sup> In a related vein, Ad Reinhardt left us a chronology of his own life that intersperses important dates in modern art history with a record of successful Third World liberation movements, all of which are interwoven with the significant events of his personal career.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, Reinhardt published a number of drawings that satirised ethnocentrism, militarism, and neocolonialism.

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35 Motherwell 1966, pp. 64–5.

36 Thomas Merton, Letter to Ad Reinhardt (12 January 1964), published in *ARTFORUM*, vol. 17, no. 4, December 1978, p. 27.

37 Craven 1989b, pp. 15–20.

38 Quezada 1987, p. 47.

39 Reinhardt 1975 [1967], pp. 4–8.



The disinclination to endorse nationalistic projects and ethnocentric language was explicable not only because of political convictions, but also because of the fact that most of the Abstract Expressionists were either immigrants or the offspring of immigrants. As such, they were directly implicated in the US congressional criticism during the late 1940s and early 1950s of subversive artists who were 'newly made American'.<sup>40</sup>

### Surrealism and Third World Liberation

Antipathy for cultural chauvinism was also very consistent with the deep influence on Abstract Expressionism of the Surrealists – an influence Greenberg and other formalists have been loathe to admit. Yet at precisely the period in the 1940s when Surrealism was most important for the Abstract Expressionists, André Breton was proclaiming the importance of Third World art over that of Europe. In 1943, Breton labelled Aimé Césaire's damning indictment of European colonialism and Western racism, in *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Return to My Native Land), as 'nothing less than the greatest lyrical monument of our times'.<sup>41</sup> Picasso, who was also deeply moved by Césaire's work, illustrated in 1950 the fourth book of poetry by this Martinique writer, *Corps perdu*. In Haiti during 1945, André Breton told poets of this Caribbean country:

Surrealism is allied with peoples of colour, first because it has sided with them against all forms of imperialism and white brigandage ... and secondly because of the profound affinities between surrealism and 'primitive' thought ... It is therefore no accident, but a *sign of the times*, that the greatest impulses towards new paths for Surrealism have been furnished ... by my greatest friends of colour – Aimé Césaire in poetry and Wifredo Lam in painting.<sup>42</sup>

In addition, Breton and the Surrealists expressed solidarity with the struggle of North American Indians, the cause of Algerian independence, and the movement for national liberation in Vietnam. The latter position, which was voiced in an essay entitled 'Freedom is a Vietnamese Word' (1947), coincided both

40 Mathews 1976, p. 773; cites House Un-American Activities Committee, Hearings, 916.

41 Breton 1978 [1943], p. 232.

42 Breton 1978 [1945], 'Interview with René Belance', p. 256 and Breton 1959 [1945] 'Speech to Young Haitian Poets', p. 259; Cox 1982, p. 46 discusses this connection. For an overview of Picasso's relation to Aimé Césaire, see: Berger 1980, pp. 136–40.

with the beginning of US involvement there and with the enunciation of one of the ideological cornerstones of the Cold War, namely, the Truman Doctrine.<sup>43</sup> (Nor should we forget that in the 1960s, when US intervention in Vietnam had become an international issue and the Truman Doctrine was again being repudiated by the left, that several Abstract Expressionists – Ad Reinhardt, Willem de Kooning, and Barnett Newman – were prominent supporters of the anti-war movement. Thus, not surprisingly the most significant group of paintings from the Vietnam War era – the superb *Napalm Elegies* (1968–74) by Rudolf Baranik – was produced by a second generation Abstract Expressionist who was a close friend of both Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt.)<sup>44</sup>

Surrealism, the European avant-garde group with the greatest affinity to non-Western art, as well as the most sympathy for the struggle against exploitation of Third World people, was also of immense significance for the Abstract Expressionists in this regard. Third World Surrealists, and there are a number of important ones, have in turn been active opponents of Western imperialism.

Aside from Aimé Césaire's eloquent condemnation of neo-colonialism, there are the notable actions of Wifredo Lam, a onetime friend of Jackson Pollock and a lifelong socialist who was a firm partisan of the Cuban Revolution until his death in 1982;<sup>45</sup> of Roberto Matta, who has worked on behalf of the revolutionary governments of Cuba, Chile, and Nicaragua (in homage to which he has helped found a Museum of Latin American Art in solidarity with the Nicaraguan people); and Frida Kahlo, who was as committed to socialism as she was opposed to US intervention in Latin America. (One of the last photographs of Kahlo, taken shortly before her death in 1954, showed her in a large demonstration in Mexico City against the CIA-led military coup that overthrew the democratically elected Jacobo Arbenz government of Guatemala.)<sup>46</sup>

In keeping with their mission to *changer la vie*, the Surrealists mounted a radical critique of Western culture that was based on the ideas of Freud about the unconscious, the concepts of Marx concerning the history of political economy, and a view of nature common to most indigenous cultures of the Third World.<sup>47</sup> This concern on the part of the Surrealists, both from Europe and from Latin America, with Native American art was a manifestation of their commitment to an organically integrated world, which they felt the West had lost and abori-

43 Breton 1978 [1947], pp. 339–40. See also: Breton 1978 [1960], pp. 177 ff.

44 See: Cox 1982, pp. 177 ff. and Schwartz 1971, pp. 97–105.

45 Jimenez 1982, p. 183 and Mosquera 1983, pp. 179–80.

46 Herrera 1983, plate 82.

47 Rosemont 1978, pp. 256, 259, 340.

ginal cultures still retained, albeit in diminished form. Here one is reminded of what Terry Eagleton has observed about historical progress, namely, that there was in ancient societies a 'primitive image of "measure" between humanity and Nature, which capitalist society necessarily abrogates and which socialist society can reproduce at an incomparably higher level'.<sup>48</sup> Indicative of the Surrealists' pre-occupation with this type of historical advance was their avowed effort to find a collective myth signifying the reciprocal accommodation of humanity's elemental needs. Such a framework would presumably aid in an historical transcendence of the sterile instrumental reasoning and technological domination *over* nature concomitant with capitalism.

Such a post-colonial interchange with non-Eurocentric art was not without contradictions, however, even when the art of the Surrealists was meant to oppose Western hegemony. This point has been aptly shown by Oriana Baddeley and Valerie Fraser in a discussion of how Roberto Matta first drew on, then later broke with Surrealism, which, 'more than any of the other -isms of the twentieth century, has provided Latin American artists with an attractive framework within which to work'.<sup>49</sup> Yet, simultaneously, Surrealism, with its notable critique of Western scientism and instrumental thinking, constituted in the work of Matta both a progressive counter to hegemonic values in the West *and* a regressive convergence with Western stereotypes about Latin American culture as irrational or unscientific. This paradox in turn explains how Matta was expelled in the late 1940s from the 'anti-rationalist' Surrealist movement, when he gravitated towards a more cerebral art allied to 'a form of reason that can reason the eternal anew'.<sup>50</sup>

It was the mode of artistic production on which much of this non-Eurocentric art was based that appealed to the Surrealists in more general terms. Their avant-garde and egalitarian vision of a 'surreal' future society in which every person would be an artist, with art being fully integrated into daily affairs, seemed to have a real link with the art production of some Native American societies. All members of these tribes were involved in some type of artistic practice, even when some professionalism did exist.<sup>51</sup> In these communities, then, art was expected to serve society as a whole rather than to be simply a private affair. (Here it should be noted that Surrealism at its most profound was not about reducing art to personal subjectivity, but rather about expanding art

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48 Eagleton 1976, p. 13.

49 Baddeley and Fraser 1989, p. 6. Dawn Ades has, in several publications, also argued this point about Surrealism and Latin American art. See, for example Ades 1988b, pp. 17–18.

50 Ades 1988a, p. 107.

51 Feest 1980, pp. 14, 27.

production to address the historical, hence also institutional, construction of subjectivity *per se*.)

As such, skill was associated with the capacity to give visual form to communal concerns. Furthermore, the *relatively* disalienating character of this art production in conjunction with its integrative and totalising aims made it appear more synthetic in character than was artwork of the fragmented Western culture in which they lived. For this reason, Breton claimed that in both Oceanic art and Native American art 'one finds the greatest sustained effort to express the interpenetration of physical and mental, and to resolve the dualism of perception and representation'.<sup>52</sup>

Aside from exhibiting their own art with that of the Northwest Coast Indians, the Surrealists also drew on these non-Eurocentric cultural forms in a number of ways. Max Ernst's autographical essay of 1942 featured an *alter-ego* in the totemic form of a bird named 'Lop-lop', while a constant motif of his oeuvre was the reference to bird-like creatures with totemic connotations. A particularly effective example of this Native American influence is seen in Joan Miró's *Harlequin's Carnival* (1925), the main motif of which resembles the indigenous masks from the Yukon region.<sup>53</sup>

A structuralist analysis of these masks (such as the one written by Claude Lévi-Strauss in 1943 while he was exiled in New York along with the Surrealists)<sup>54</sup> divulges the reason for producing these masks, which was based on a nexus of social relationships and cultural concerns that would have had considerable resonance both for the Surrealists' own critique of the capitalist mode of production and for the later communal-based, anarchist-inspired vision of the future presented by Barnett Newman.<sup>55</sup> For these Northwest Coast masks were an outgrowth of the potlatch ceremony in these Native American communities, the aim of which was to gain fame through giving away the most wealth. Based not on the dynamic of personal accumulation, but rather on the mode of exchange known as reciprocity, these potlatches brought status to the Northwest Coast chiefs (of the Kwakiutl, Tlingit, and Haida) who, after having led the production of the most food in the area, then staged the most extravagant potlatches whereby the members of rival groups were given more goods than they could possibly return. The major incentive for production, then, was not personal consumption but rather the prestige attached to general material redistribution. Part of the ceremony of potlatch involved the masks and the

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52 Breton 1973, p. 278.

53 Cowling 1978, pp. 488–9.

54 Lévi-Strauss 1968 [1943], pp. 175–82.

55 Newman, 1968.

well-known totem poles, the latter of which were constructed to honour the leaders most capable of protecting their own communities *and* those of their rivals from scarcity. In addition, the totemic images were intended to confirm a chief's harmonious relationship to natural forces, that is his totemic pedigree.<sup>56</sup>

Prior to the advent of colonial commercial relations with the West in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, which helped to destroy the traditional economy of the Native Americans (and potlatch was made illegal by Canada and the US in the late nineteenth century), the ceremony of potlatch functioned along sound ecological and economic lines. Each year, for example, potlatch served to transfer food and other necessities from centres of high productivity to the less fortunate areas. Furthermore, with fluctuations in nature's yield throughout the various areas, last year's guests often became next year's host. Aboriginally, potlatch among the Native Americans on the Northwest Coast meant that each year the haves gave and the have-nots received. To eat, all those without food needed to do was to concede publicly the merits of their rival producers. In the absence of any formal political institutions integrating the dispersed and independent villages of the Native Americans into a common economic framework, this system of competitive feasting created an extensive network of informal economic relations that equalised annual fluctuations in productivity among villages occupying different microenvironments.<sup>57</sup>

### Abstract Expressionism and Native American Culture

In a series of exhibitions at the Betty Parsons Gallery during 1944 and 1946, Surrealists collaborated with Abstract Expressionists to mount shows of pre-Colombian sculpture, Oceanic wood carvings, and Northwest Coast objects. For the fall 1946 exhibition entitled 'North West Coast Indian Painting', Max Ernst loaned four of the 28 pieces shown, while Barnett Newman wrote the foreword to the catalogue. In this essay, Newman stated the following: 'Just as modern art stands as an island of revolt in the narrow stream of Western European aesthetics, [so] the many primitive art traditions stand apart as authentic aesthetic accomplishments that flourished without benefit of European history'.<sup>58</sup>

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56 Harris 1974, pp. 94–113.

57 Ibid.

58 Newman 1946.

Newman also discussed Kwakiutl art in the catalogue essay that accompanied a 1947 exhibition, 'The Ideographic Picture'. This latter show featured recent paintings by Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, Theodoros Stamos, and Clyfford Still as well as by Newman himself. The prefatory discussion by Newman demonstrates that he clearly saw Northwest Coast Indian art as a signifier of many ideological values that were of paramount importance to his own anti-formalist and avant-garde intentions. To quote Newman: 'The Kwakiutl artist painting on a hide did not ... in the name of a higher purity, renounce the living world for the meaningless materialism of design ... The abstract shape was, therefore, real rather than a formal abstraction of visual fact'.<sup>59</sup>

Newman then went on to contend that the work in the exhibition was part of a 'new force in American painting that is the counterpart of the primitive art impulse'.<sup>60</sup> To this he added that it was time 'to make clear the community of intention' which motivates a group of artists 'who are not abstract painters, although working in what is known as the abstract style'.<sup>61</sup> Hence, for Newman these contemporary paintings, like the works of Kwakiutl artists, were concerned with the presentation of a newly unifying if still emergent worldview, rather than with any isolated artistic style. Furthermore, the type of society that produced this Northwest Coast art was both highly decentralised and notably mutualist. In this way and others, the communal culture of Northwest society was analogous to Newman's own anarchist political views, which he advocated from the 1930s till his death in 1970.<sup>62</sup>

In the 1940s, Newman apparently acquired four museum-quality totem poles made by the Haida Indians. The visual link is obvious enough between these predominantly vertical forms and Newman's own use of the 'zip' motif in his sculpture as well as in his paintings after 1948. In addition, Newman's sculptures and paintings, with their intimations of 'sublime' infinity, also relate to communal, peasant-based societies from Eastern Europe through the two *Endless Columns* (1918, 1937) by Constantin Brancusi. Like the Northwest Coast totem poles and Rumanian peasant grave posts, the vertical artworks of Newman and Brancusi are based on an anti-classical aesthetic with the following attributes from both Western popular culture and non-Eurocentric art of the Northwest Coast: the use of basic shapes capable of 'endless' repetition, a lack of compositional closure (this is especially true of folk songs and ballads,

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59 Newman 1947, p. 550.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Cox 1982, pp. 67–82 and Craven 1990, pp. 86–91.

which lack a coda in high art terms), and a disuse of anecdotal elements as well as of 'realistic' conventions.

Another Abstract Expressionist who relied on the visual imagery of Kwakiutl art was Adolph Gottlieb. In fact, several of Gottlieb's works from the 1940s bear a distinct formal affinity with Northwest Coast Indian masks and totem poles that were associated with potlatch. His 1946 painting *Voyager's Return*, for example, features an obvious inter-image dialogue with these earlier totemic works, from the notable combination of interlocking panels with organic referents to the cursive figurative elements that evoke rather than illustrate natural phenomena. In Northwest Coast art, the attributes of people and animals are wilfully conflated so as to double or triple the totemic readings. Just as Lévi-Strauss referred to this metamorphic quality of Indian masks, which induces shifting 'readings' of the images, so Gottlieb's pictographic components intentionally involve open-ended signification. As Lawrence Alloway has observed of Gottlieb's pictographs, they are not transcribable in allegorical terms, because they draw on ambiguous associations without a one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified. Accordingly, Alloway notes of Gottlieb's intent that 'there is the notion of the work's "logic" completed by the spectator's perception', with the result being that 'the spectator's area of legitimate interpretation was somewhat expanded'.<sup>63</sup>

Gottlieb's sombre pictographs from 1941–51 were in turn over-determined by their obvious link to contemporary Latin American art, specifically the optimistic paintings from the 1930s by Joaquín Torres-García of Uruguay. Concerned with uniting European Constructivism (as represented by De Stijl) and Indoamerican signs, Torres-García attempted this fusion under the heading of 'Constructive Universalism'. Because of his desire both for plastic construction and for legible ideas, he originally employed graphic references in which there is 'the written name of the thing, or a schematic image, resembling the apparent reality as little as possible: like a sign'.<sup>64</sup> In his major treatise on pre-Columbian art, *Metafísica de la prehistoria indo-americana* (1939), Torres-García contended that the Native American past could provide a key to creating a Latin American culture for the future.

Yet the construction of culture is neither an individual act nor simply the historical reclamation of past values, and Torres-García found himself isolated from any profound structural change that could help sustain the progressive revitalisation of pre-Columbian art within a new cultural synthesis.

63 Alloway 1975, pp. 26–7.

64 Torres-García 1970 [1939], pp. 172–3.

Subsequently, he increasingly codified his pictorial symbolism, thus trying to enforce a one-to-one correspondence of signifier to signified in such a way as to 'insure' historical progress at a time when spectatorial consummation could not. (Here, as elsewhere, historical determinism became the 'solution' to a situation in which profound change was highly unlikely.) Revealingly, the most significant Latin American artists who have drawn on the vocabulary of forms used by Torres-García and Gottlieb, in conjunction with those of pre-Columbian culture, are painters in a revolutionary society who have re-emphasised open-ended signification and spectatorial participation in the construction of the work's meaning. This is the case, for example, with Santos Medina of Nicaragua. His paintings, with their obvious affinity to the work of Torres-García and Gottlieb as well as to that of Native Americans, are part of the broader democratisation of culture in Nicaragua from 1979–89, whereby the spectator's old passivity was transformed in accordance with 'the death of the author'.<sup>65</sup>

Aside from Newman and Gottlieb, Jackson Pollock was probably the Abstract Expressionist most indebted to Native American traditions, both from the Northwest Coast and from the Southwest in the United States. Even while living as a youth in Arizona, Pollock had many opportunities to explore the old Indian sites near Phoenix. Sometime between 1939–41, Pollock not only read and was deeply impressed with an article by John Graham, entitled 'Primitive Art and Picasso' (*Magazine of Art*, April 1937), but also sought out the author. (It has recently been noted that there is a marked formal resemblance between an Eskimo mask that Graham published with his 1937 article and some paintings from this period by Pollock, specifically, *Head*, *Masqued Image*, and *Bird*.)<sup>66</sup>

During the 1930s and 1940s, Pollock read about Indians from the Southwest in Reports of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. His involvement with Native American art went much beyond a facile fascination with the 'exotic other' to a fundamental identification with the embattled view of nature and probably also with the marginalised location of Native American culture inside US society. In a summary of how these Native American values were embraced by Pollock, William Rubin has observed:

When asked whether he painted from nature, Pollock replied: I *am* nature ... Pollock sensed a continuity between himself and the natural world and loved everything associated with the earth, whence his interest in Navaho

65 Craven 1989b, pp. 5–28, 97–106.

66 Sandler 1980, p. 57.



sand painters. Their method of ordering an art that was literally made from and upon the earth seemed to express the organic relation of the artist to the physical universe ... In a marvelous image, Pollock described this elaboration and enrichment of the canvas on the ground before him as 'gardening' the picture.<sup>67</sup>

Just as Pollock's works from the late 1930s feature a use of colour connected to that of Native American as well as Mexican art, so Pollock's painting entitled *Moon Woman Cuts the Circle* (1943) includes both a definite reference to American Indian headdress and a possible reference to the archetypal circle of the tail-eating snake in Native American mythology – a theme Pollock knew from images in North American Indian as well as in pre-Columbian art from Mesoamerica. Furthermore, this aboriginal motif appears in at least one of Pollock's drawings from the early 1940s.<sup>68</sup>

While Pollock himself always mentioned his deep debt to European art ('the two artists I admire most [are] Picasso and Miró'),<sup>69</sup> he also never restricted the discussion of either his paintings or his celebrated method to the Eurocentric interpretation put forth by formalist commentators and even some of their left-wing critics. In one of his first published statements, for example, Pollock stated in 1944:

I have always been very impressed with the plastic qualities of American Indian art. The Indians have the true painter's approach in their capacity to get hold of appropriate images, and in their understanding of what constitutes painterly subject matter. Their color is essentially [American] Western, their vision has the basic universality of all real art. Some people find references to American Indian art and calligraphy in parts of my pictures. That wasn't intentional; probably was the result of early memories and enthusiasms.<sup>70</sup>

Even more significant, though, is how Pollock attributed the origin of his famous drip technique in 1947–8 (which has so often been hailed as a signal moment in the triumph of high art from white North America) to a critical assimilation of Native American methods. With his rightly acclaimed all-over paintings from the late 1940s and early 1950s, Pollock advanced from a mere

67 Rubin 1979b, (Part 2) p. 86.

68 Rubin 1979a, (Part 1), p. 116.

69 Pollock 1982 [1944], p. 4.

70 Ibid.

inter-image dialogue with Native American objects to a direct linkage with the artisanal process whereby Native art was made. In so doing, Pollock's remarks elicit a recollection of Walter Benjamin's view that art is progressive less because of the objective form it takes than by means of the mode of artistic production it entails. (This is an issue that I have addressed at length elsewhere.)<sup>71</sup>

In a concise discussion of his new technique, Pollock spoke of how he left the canvas without a stretcher on the floor rather than using an easel as was traditional in European art. By placing the canvas on the floor, Pollock could work from all four sides and 'literally be *in the painting*'.<sup>72</sup> He then observed: '*This is akin to the method of the Indian sand painters of the West*' [my emphasis].<sup>73</sup> Similarly, he went from 'the usual painters' tools', such as palette and brushes, towards, 'sticks, trowels, knives, and dripping fluid paint or a heavy impasto with sand, broken glass and other foreign matter added'.<sup>74</sup> All of this also recalls the procedure used by a Navajo artist, who collects sand, herbs, and other ready-made natural materials before executing the image. The aim of a Navajo sand painting was, upon its completion, to place the ill-person back *in harmony with Nature*. Thus, it was crucial for the person to be literally *in the painting* for it to work properly, which meant that the ill-person sat upon the painting after its completion. Significantly, Navajo sand paintings, which can be as large as 24 feet in diameter, were related to the one indigenous tradition of wall painting – in the fresco secco manner – among Native Americans north of Mexico, that of the Pueblo area, which began by about 1000 A.D.<sup>75</sup>

Yet when Pollock's connection to Navajo art is noted by art historians, they fail to discuss the particular fate of Navajo art in this period, not to mention official US policy concerning tribal culture in general – *a policy strongly at odds with Pollock's relation to tribal culture*. During the 1940s and 1950s, almost any expression of tribalism indigenous to various Native American nations was systematically discouraged as part of the US policy of assimilationism. In a recent interview, Navajo linguist Martha Jackson noted just how severe this strategy of assimilationism was on Indian culture when she was growing

71 Craven 1990, pp. 71–6 [Chapter 28 of this book].

72 Pollock 1982 [1944], p. 4. Richard Shiff has written one of the most incisive discussions of how Pollock's technique used Navajo sandpainting to transfer gestures from hand to body, so as to index movement in a new way. See: Shiff 1987, p. 112.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid.

75 Feest 1980, pp. 90–1.

up in the 1940s.<sup>76</sup> She recalled, for example, how her white teachers washed her mouth out with soap whenever she spoke Navajo, her native tongue, at the school run by the US Bureau of Indian Affairs. Similar discouragement confronted any practitioner of Native American art who attempted to follow traditional techniques for producing tribal images.<sup>77</sup>

In 1932, 'The Studio' was founded as part of the Santa Fe Indian School. Its first director was a white woman, Dorothy Dunn, who helped to institute a new Pan-Indian style that was meant to supersede the tribal art of various nations.<sup>78</sup> As was true of earlier 'advice' by white North American anthropologists, this programme was a corollary to federal assimilationist policies. It promoted homogenised products by Indians that were premised on white expectations concerning 'Indian' culture. Not surprisingly, the artworks in the Pan-Indian manner varied little even when executed by people of different tribes with quite disparate cultural practices and artistic forms. In a word, the Pan-Indian art coercively encouraged by the US government in the 1940s and 1950s was ethnic art based on white middle-class definitions of ethnic 'differences'.<sup>79</sup>

The Studio (which was repudiated by Native Americans during the 1960s when progressive movements sought to reclaim their tribal art practices) taught Native Americans *to illustrate* aspects of their culture by means of European conventions for 'realism' and in *permanent* Western media. The desired result on the part of the federal government was the conception of an 'Indian' style using pastel colours, pleasant scenes, narrative conventions and 'realistic' figuration, all of which would make this art easy for potential white patrons to 'understand'. It was, then, 'entrepreneurial' art by Indians. An example of the disempowering Native American art that resulted is the illustrative 'Bambi' style of Navajo painter Harrison Begay, who was active in the 1940s and was a prime representative of the Pan-Indian movement fostered by the US government. This art had little to do with furthering Native American self-determination and much to do with asserting the ethnocentric hegemony of 'mainstream' culture in the US<sup>80</sup>

Conversely, Jackson Pollock's use of Navajo sand painting techniques, like the obliquity of his signification, the 'strangeness' of his figurative references, and the anti-illustrative nature of his paintings all contradict the Pan-Indian

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76 Calta 1988, p. A25.

77 Feest 1980, pp. 12–4, 98–100.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

style of assimilationist policy even as these attributes possess an elective affinity with traditional tribalist art. Pollock, who admired the Southwest Indian cultures for their differences along with their 'universality', accented what was formally unusual but not exotically picturesque. As such, he used the components from Native American art that were least 'understandable' in light of white middle-class culture, thus making his work 'difficult' for mainstream audiences, as was the art of traditional Indian cultures. While Pollock's paintings are related to the Navajos' sense of cultural self-determination, particularly in their avowed relation to nature, the Pan-Indian art produced under the auspices of the U.S. government presented Navajo culture as utterly subordinate, hence as tolerable only in terms of its charming 'exoticism'.

Along with having an affinity to the Indian concept of how nature and society should be harmoniously integrated – which constitutes a critical alternative to the technologist view on which capitalism is based – Pollock perhaps also had more sympathetic feelings for many of the social values of the Navajo than he did for the prevailing values of US society in the 1940s and 1950s. As a leftist or left sympathiser, Pollock probably would have appreciated the fact that the Navajo (of Arizona, Utah, and New Mexico) upheld certain values quite at odds with those being championed by the McCarthyists: (1) they originally had no concept of absolute private property (something introduced by European colonialism); (2) they continued to see land as the basic framework for life as opposed to a mere factor in the production of personal profit; (3) they made no sharp distinction between their lives and their art (baskets, fibres, sand paintings); and (4) they maintained much more egalitarian, far more progressive gender relations (and this is a trait with which Pollock would probably have sympathised less) than was true both of mainstream US society *and* of the avant-garde, particularly during the McCarthy period, which was as patriarchal in tone as it was ethnocentric in character.<sup>81</sup>

This concept of gender relations, which evidently shows up (whether consciously or unconsciously) in one of Pollock's paintings mentioned below, was manifested in both the matrilineal and matrifocal structure of Navajo society. Of the supernatural forces in their pantheon, the most significant is a female deity known as Changing Woman, who is said to have been present at the creation to ensure that the Navajo received the tools that they needed to survive. Furthermore, it is quite difficult to distinguish male deities from their female counterparts, whose different physical attributes are indicated only by minor

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81 Waters 1969, pp. 9–17.

details.<sup>82</sup> In fact, it is precisely this latter trait of Navajo mythology that explains the sexual ambiguity of Pollock's *Moon Woman Cuts the Circle*, in which the female (who is hardly distinguishable from a male) also wears the headdress of a chief.

With respect to these Navajo cultural practices, it is important to remember that Pollock's relationship with Lee Krasner was more equitable and less sexist than those of some of the other Abstract Expressionists with their spouses. (Needless to say, it is not necessary to argue that Pollock was a feminist to point out that his marital relation was not characterised by the same degree of inequality as that which was generally true of this period.) Throughout her marriage to Pollock, Krasner was encouraged by him to continue pursuing a career as a painter, rather than sacrificing her aspirations in order to support him financially, as happened with some of the wives of the other Abstract Expressionists. Robert Motherwell has even implied that Krasner 'dominated' Pollock and has complained that she spoke too often for the frequently more reserved Pollock.

Krasner herself has also sharply criticised the distressing *machismo* of Barnett Newman (several recent articles, including the very perceptive ones by Anne Wagner on Lee Krasner and Carol Duncan on Willem de Kooning, have addressed the gendered aspects of Abstract Expressionism in New York).<sup>83</sup> And, indeed, in his 1947 catalogue preface to 'The Ideographic Pictures', Newman said of the Kwakiutl artists that they left 'the play of non-objective patterns to the women basket weavers'.<sup>84</sup> Concerning her relationship with Pollock, however, Krasner claimed that theirs was 'a relationship of equals ... He treated me like a professional painter. If he didn't, we wouldn't have stayed together'.<sup>85</sup> About most of the other male members of the Abstract Expressionist group, though, Krasner stated sharply that: 'There were very few painters in that so-called circle who acknowledged I painted at all, except for Bradley Walker Tomlin and Franz Kline, who spoke to me sympathetically about my plight'.<sup>86</sup>

Aside from the above-mentioned links with Navajo culture, Pollock's paintings from the mid-1940s through the mid-1950s were also probably connected to some technical lessons earlier acquired through Mexican mural artist David

82 Klein 1980, pp. 7–9.

83 Rose 1977, p. 100; Wagner 1989, pp. 42–56; and Duncan 1989, pp. 171–8.

84 Newman [1947] in Chipp 1968, p. 550.

85 Glueck 1981, p. 58. I am grateful to Vivian Rehberg, who has done research on Lee Krasner, for having discussed this issue with me.

86 Glueck 1981, p. 58. A brief but excellent discussion of the institutional barriers faced by women artists in this period can be found in: Chadwick 1990, pp. 297–312.

Siqueiros, an advocate of synthesising Native American values with revolutionary techniques. Shortly after arriving in New York City in early 1936 as an official delegate from Mexico to the American Artists Congress, Siqueiros organised a small core of artists, 'ready to raise the standard of a true revolutionary art program'.<sup>87</sup> Jackson Pollock was one of the initial nucleus of seven US painters and six Latin American artists who worked in the Experimental Workshop located at 5 West 19 Street. Of particular significance for Pollock's later development was the experimental use of new methods (spray guns, air brushes) and new materials, particularly synthetic paints, such as Duco – a type that, along with enamel paint, increasingly appeared in Pollock's important works during and after the late 1940s.<sup>88</sup>

Furthermore, Pollock was probably influenced by Siqueiros in several other ways: (1) through the Mexican muralist's emphasis on 'controlled accidents'; (2) through his belief that 'the fundamental problem of revolutionary art is a technical problem' (necessitating a 'dialectical methodology'); (3) by Siqueiros's rejection of 'socialist realism' (in favour of what he called 'dialectical realism'); (4) by his belief in the use of a dynamic composition that, in conjunction with a large scale, triggers shifting viewpoints in the viewer; and (5) through his commitment to a new art based in part on an affirmation of Native American culture.<sup>89</sup>

This latter view, one that quite clearly reconfirmed Pollock's own above-mentioned sympathies, was forcefully advanced in Siqueiros's famous *Manifesto of Painting* (1924). In this declaration, Siqueiros said he spoke to and for 'the indigenous races humiliated throughout the centuries'.<sup>90</sup> While calling for a new mural art 'valuable to the people', Siqueiros stated: 'Not only the noble labor but even the smallest manifestations of the material and spiritual vitality of our race spring from our native midst'.<sup>91</sup> (The legacy of Siqueiros and the Mexican mural movement, including their reclamation of pre-Columbian culture, has been extended into the present by the mural movement in revolutionary Nicaragua, as in the cycle of Santa María de los Angeles (1982–5) in Managua.)<sup>92</sup>

In underscoring Pollock's considerable links to the artistic practices of Native Americans, as well as his ideological affinities with some of their values,

87 Hurlburt 1976, pp. 238–9.

88 O'Connor 1967, pp. 80 ff.

89 Siqueiros 1979.

90 Siqueiros 1923, p. 1.

91 Ibid.

92 Kunzle 1989, pp. 47–60.

it is hardly necessary to deny that Pollock was also indebted to the vocabulary of form originating with Cubism and extended through such later pieces as Picasso's *Guernica* (one of Pollock's favourite works). What is at stake in the dialogical understanding of Abstract Expressionism is how Cubism and Western Surrealism converged with Native American art and Latin American post-war culture in the mature 'American' style of Pollock. Such a look at the dialogical nature of Abstract Expressionism, however, reminds us of what has been re-emphasised recently about European Cubism and indeed modernity in general, namely, that it exists as an uneasy locus of high art and mass culture, of Western artistic practices and non-Western artforms. In this way, the emergent collage aesthetic disrupted the false harmony of a supposedly self-contained tradition, while Cubism itself became a message from the margins of society. All of this has led Thomas Crow to speak of Cubism as 'exploiting to critical purpose contradictions within and between sectors of that culture'.<sup>93</sup>

Contradictions within Western culture and between the 'two' Americas certainly were preoccupations of the one Abstract Expressionist most committed to the production of collages, that is, Robert Motherwell. Hispanic themes are common in his work, with the tragic defeat of the left by fascism in the Spanish Civil War being, for him, the most moving political event of the time. It is important to observe here that the cursive figurative motif in Motherwell's *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*, that of dismembered male genitals, is probably related to a passage in André Malraux's novel *L'Espoir* about the Spanish Civil War. This celebrated book by an author whom the Abstract Expressionists much admired, contained the following threat over telephone by a fascist to the leftist forces: 'We're coming this week to castrate you'.<sup>94</sup>

Even before 1949 when he began his *Elegies* series, as his own 'private insistence that a terrible death happened that should not be forgot',<sup>95</sup> Motherwell had already begun to deal with revolutionary themes in Latin American art. He admired the popular prints of Mexican satirist José Guadalupe Posada, who was active on the eve of the Mexican Revolution, and in 1943 Motherwell produced his collage *Pancho Villa Dead and Alive*, which was named after the famous revolutionary hero.

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93 Crow 1985, p. 250.

94 Malraux 1968, p. 7. For a discussion of Malraux's importance to the Abstract Expressionists, see: Ashton 1992 [1972], pp. 103–5. For a fine overview of both Motherwell's relation to Malraux and of the reference to genitalia in Motherwell's series, see: Mattison 1986, pp. 69, 200–2.

95 Sandler 1971, p. 207.

During the early 1940s, Motherwell was close to the exiled Surrealists, particularly to the Chilean Roberto Matta, whose concept of automatism influenced his own work. Revealingly, when in 1944 Motherwell gave his lecture 'The Modern Painter's World', he illustrated this paper, which he himself described as a 'socialist analysis',<sup>96</sup> with reproductions of works by Carlos Mérida of Guatemala and Roberto Matta of Chile, including an interpretation by Mérida of the *Popol Vuh*, a famous Mayan text. The other reproductions were of two works by Henry Moore, for whom pre-Columbian art was a major source of inspiration, and one by Motherwell himself. Both by the manner in which he argued for the transition to a socialist society and because he accompanied this text with non-Eurocentric artwork (or with Western art clearly indebted to it), Motherwell provided a clear analogy to the way André Breton was at the very same time both extolling Third World art and denouncing Western imperialism. The historical impasse would not be broken in the West, Breton said, but in the post-colonial societies where cultural self-definition and revolutionary movements were then originating in opposition to the existing world order.<sup>97</sup>

In his lecture, Motherwell also equated the general intellectual advances by avant-garde art with the social justice and material progress to be attained through socialism, however remote its prospects seemed at that moment in history. At present, progressive artists in the West were limited in their actions to the conception of an internationalist visual language both heterogeneous and non-Eurocentric in character:

The modern artist's social history is that of a spiritual being in a property loving world ... The socialist is to free the working class from the domination of property, so that the spiritual can be possessed by all. The function of the artists is to make actual the spiritual, so that it is there to be possessed ... it is a question of solidarity with other men ... The strength of Arp, Masson, Miró, and Picasso lies in the great humanity of their formalism ... Until there is a radical revolution in the values of modern society, we may look for a highly formal art to continue. We can be grateful for its extraordinary technical discoveries ... When a revolution in values will take place, no one at present can tell.<sup>98</sup>

96 Robert Motherwell, Letter to William Baziotes (6 September 1944), William Baziotes Papers, Archives of American Art, N 70/21, no. 139.

97 Breton 1978 [1945], 'Speech to Young Haitian Poets'.

98 Motherwell 1944, p. 10.



In correlating economic democracy with cultural rejuvenation along post-colonial lines, Motherwell provided a prophetic look at the cultural project on which subsequent movements for national liberation in Latin America have been drawn. Motherwell's citation of the Mayan *Popol Vuh* in relation to *future* progress, for example, finds an arresting analogy today in much of the most important Latin American literature from Nicaragua and elsewhere. As part of their assertion of cultural self-definition enjoined with opposition to US intervention, progressive Latin American authors have used the *Popol Vuh* and other pre-Columbian texts about Native American values as a means of criticising the present world system. This is true of novels by Miguel Angel Asturias from Guatemala, as well as of poems by Pablo Neruda of Chile (both of whom won the Nobel Prize for Literature), and of poetry by Ernesto Cardenal, Nicaragua's Minister of Culture from 1979–88. One of Cardenal's most well-known anthologies is *Homenaje a los indios americanos*, which expressly uses values of pre-Columbian culture to mount a critique of multi-national capitalism and Western militarism.<sup>99</sup>

### Abstract Expressionism and Afro-American Marginalisation

Just as Barnett Newman contended that 'Picasso may have dreamed of a half dozen Utopias but his primary dream – the one that gave him his voice – was Negro sculpture',<sup>100</sup> so most Abstract Expressionists established links with Afro-American culture and some actively supported the Civil Rights movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Indeed, one of the painters who participated in the Artists' Session at Studio 35 in 1950 (the transcript of which was edited by Robert Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt for publication) was Norman Lewis, the only African-American artist among the first generation of Abstract Expressionists. Perhaps it is not surprising that the one major Abstract Expressionist who was black would be the one member of the group who has been most consistently ignored in accounts of this period in US art.<sup>101</sup> As was recently noted in a catalogue accompanying a major retrospective of Lewis's paintings, the reasons for this omission seem clear enough:

99 Cardenal, 1977, p. 14.

100 Newman 1970 [1946], p. 70.

101 Jennings 1989, p. 8.

It could be posed that his work was overlooked because of his active political involvement [on the left]; but in the final analysis, given the place and time in which he lived, there is the overwhelming fact that his race and the color of his skin took precedence and caused due recognition to be denied.<sup>102</sup>

As the large 1989 exhibition at the Kenkeleba Gallery of Norman Lewis's oeuvre demonstrated, he was painting all-over compositions in a fluent gestural style with a very distinctive touch as early as 1946–7. Among the notable works from this period in his career are *Metropolitan Crowd* (1946), *Untitled* (1947), *Jazz Musicians* (1948), and *Mumbo Jumbo* (1950), the latter two of which directly engage in a subtle inter-image dialogue with the improvisational structure of Afro-American music and also with the oblique figuration of much African Art. Furthermore, Lewis, who was the son of a longshoreman from Harlem, studied in the art school of the John Reed Club and later rejected social realism (which he had practised in the 1930s and early 40s) from a left-wing perspective.<sup>103</sup>

After 1945 he considered Western realism in art to be 'reactionary' because of its provincialism, and by implication its Eurocentrism, or what he termed its lack of 'universalism'. Nor did he consider his new efforts at creating a multi-cultural art to be 'apolitical', however much this new concept of art shifted social engagement to the meta-political, or rather ideological, level on which he was constructing a more internationalist and less Eurocentric visual language capable of synthesising non-Western cultural forms with Western pictorial traditions. In an exemplary essay, Ann Gibson has summarised well the novelty of Lewis's Abstract Expressionist paintings, by observing that the anti-hierarchical field of his all-over canvases 'assert that the aesthetic of a specific African people has a status equal to that of dominant European modes such as social realism and expressionism'.<sup>104</sup> Hence, by intermeshing these divergent sets of images, 'Lewis parodied the claim of each of these styles to authority' and created 'content by contradiction'.<sup>105</sup>

The multi-cultural and post-colonial aims motivating his own internationalising project were summarised by Norman Lewis, who envisioned art in the following terms:

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102 Norman Lewis is not mentioned in either Irving Sandler's *Triumph of American Painting* or in Serge Guilbaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.

103 Gibson 1989, p. 17.

104 Gibson 1989, p. 16.

105 Gibson 1989, p. 20.

not as reproduction or as a convenient but entirely secondary medium for propaganda but as the production of experiences which combine intellectual and emotional activities in a way that may conceivably add ... to a universal knowledge of aesthetics and the creative faculty which I feel exists for one form or another in all men.<sup>106</sup>

It was Lewis who later collaborated with Romare Bearden to found the Spiral Group of 1963 (the spiral meant 'up and out for Black artists') and the Cinque Gallery to provide exhibition space for younger African-American artists. Significantly, in the group session of 1950 held by the Abstract Expressionists, when everyone was voicing the view that they felt cut off from the public during the Cold War period, it was Norman Lewis and Ad Reinhardt (long-time friends and union activists) who were most preoccupied with reaching the public somehow. Lewis, for example, lamented the passing of the WPA period and stated:

People no longer have this intimacy with the artists, so that the public does not know actually what is going on, what is being done by the painter. I remember organising for a union on the waterfront. People then didn't know the function of a union, or what was good about it, but gradually they were made aware of it. The same is true of our relationship with the people; in making them aware of what we are doing [in art].<sup>107</sup>

After Reinhardt declared, 'I think everybody should be asked to say something about this',<sup>108</sup> the responses mostly dealt either with the undesirability of being integrated into mainstream North American culture or the impossibility of escaping marginalisation by US society. While David Hare said, 'It is not always such a good thing to find yourself an accepted part of the culture',<sup>109</sup> Jimmy Ernst added, 'I would rather be unattached to any part of society than to be commissioned to carve a picture of Mr Truman'.<sup>110</sup> But it was de Kooning who eloquently summed up their *historical predicament* (rather than just existential sentiments) when he declared: 'We have no position in the world – absolutely no position except that we just insist upon being around'.<sup>111</sup>

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106 Lewis 1989, p. 63.

107 Motherwell 1944, p. 16. Ibid.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid.

111 Ibid.

As we shall see, it was this awareness of being marginalised that accounted at least in part for the way some of the white Abstract Expressionists empathised with Afro-Americans (and also Native Americans). References to African-American culture went from the topical, such as was true of Pollock's *Lavender Mist* of 1950 that was named after a 1947 composition by Duke Ellington (Romare Bearden has stated that he knew several Abstract Expressionists who used to paint while listening to black jazz),<sup>112</sup> to the quite profound way (as Dore Ashton has pointed out) in which Willem de Kooning identified with a black protagonist in one of Faulkner's finest novels.<sup>113</sup>

Titles for de Kooning's paintings often had little connection to ideas that originally motivated the work, but such was not the case with his famous 1947 painting, *Light in August*. One of ten major paintings (along with an unrecorded number of drawings) at de Kooning's first one person exhibition, which was held in 1948 at the Charles Egan Gallery, this painting was predicated on a deep knowledge of Faulkner's 1932 novel, *Light in August*. In fact, twenty years later, in 1967, de Kooning was still fascinated with this particular book by Faulkner and he declared in an interview: 'I'd like to paint Joe Christmas one of these days'.<sup>114</sup> As Elaine de Kooning has observed, there were other influences from different novels by Faulkner on de Kooning's paintings from the late 1940s. On one occasion in this period, for example, she observed that the anvil-like shapes in one of his paintings evoked the image of a particular forest described by Faulkner. In expressing agreement with her insight, Willem de Kooning pointed out this particular passage in his own copy of Faulkner's *Sanctuary* (1931).<sup>115</sup>

The convergences between de Kooning's *Light in August* and Faulkner's novel have been perceptively discussed by Charles Stuckey.<sup>116</sup> In noting how de Kooning's painting formally interrelates with the book, he has compared the ambiguous figurative shifts of the oil painting in black and white with the constant fluctuations in Joe Christmas's uncertain sense of self as he moves between the black and white communities of the South. Furthermore, amorphous intimations of these switches in Faulkner's *Light in August* are repeatedly based upon visual metaphors limited to black and white. One febrile passage by Faulkner involving a sexual fantasy of Joanna Burden about Joe Christmas refers to 'the slow shifting from one to another of such formally erotic attitudes

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<sup>112</sup> Fraser 1988, p. 36.

<sup>113</sup> Ashton 1973, p. 194.

<sup>114</sup> Shirey 1967, p. 80.

<sup>115</sup> Stuckey 1980, p. 71.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

and gestures as a Beardsley at the time of Petronius might have drawn'.<sup>117</sup> (And, in fact, Faulkner himself was a visual artist who in his early twenties published several drawings in a Beardsley-like style.)<sup>118</sup>

About de Kooning's *Light in August* as well as many of his other paintings from this period, contemporaries noticed that the internal shapes of these works so completely interlocked that neither black nor white functions as figure or ground. As Thomas Hess (an early and eloquent defender of these paintings) noted of their forms: 'the "line" that evokes them becomes, in turn, legible as a negative of the shape it defines, and then as a shape of its own'.<sup>119</sup>

It has been further observed by Stuckey that there is an arresting and hardly deniable inter-image dialogue between de Kooning's 1947 painting and the dust jacket designed by Alvin Lustig for the 1946 New Directions edition of Faulkner's *Light in August*.<sup>120</sup> Explosive filaments of lighting interwoven with primitive graffiti-like forms on this cover are similar to formal elements in de Kooning's painting. Such an interchange with mass culture was not uncommon. On other occasions, he also expressed a qualified admiration for mass cultural phenomena like highway billboards.<sup>121</sup>

What most attracted de Kooning to Joe Christmas of *Light in August*, however, was the way this fictional character so brilliantly embodied marginalisation from mainstream US culture. As such, Joe Christmas was the paradigmatic victim of social hierarchies, racist values, and repressive forces that both spawned the domestic repression of the McCarthyist period and sustained Cold War liberal interventionism abroad. Just as de Kooning could say of the Abstract Expressionists that they were on the fringes of US society in this period, so William Faulkner movingly presented the tragic mulatto Joe Christmas in even more desperate terms in *Light in August*:

There was something rootless about him, as though no town nor city was his, no street, no walls, no square of earth his home. And that he carried this knowledge with him always as though it were a banner with a quality ruthless, lonely, and almost proud.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Faulkner 1932, p. 245.

<sup>118</sup> Hönninghausen 1987.

<sup>119</sup> Hess 1972, p. 17.

<sup>120</sup> Stuckey 1980, p. 72.

<sup>121</sup> Alloway 1975, pp. 140–4.

<sup>122</sup> Faulkner 1932, p. 27.

For Faulkner, the racial problem of the South in particular and of the US in general was not any 'timeless' struggle between 'naturally' antagonistic groups. Rather, racial discrimination in both its individual and institutional forms was seen by Faulkner as the social manifestation of economic exploitation overdetermined by misguided religious values and reactionary cultural traditions. In contending that 'people can always be saved from injustice', Faulkner stated in a well-known 1955 interview that 'if the problem of black and white existed only among children, there'd be no problem'.<sup>123</sup> Hence, he said of Southern whites:

It's only when they get old and inherit that Southern economy which depends on a system of peonage do they accept a distinction between the black man and the white man ... [sure] there are certain ignorant people that can be led to believe that one man is better than another because the Christian Bible says so, they believe all sorts of delusions ... But it's primarily, I think, economic.<sup>124</sup>

In a letter to critic Malcolm Cowley, Faulkner referred to Percy Grimm, the supremely self-assured leader of the whites who murder Joe Christmas, as a Nazi *avant la lettre*.<sup>125</sup> Conversely, Joe, because of his mixed lineage, internalised the racist views of Southern society and tortured himself with feelings of insufficiency. Unlike the 'well adjusted' Percy Grimm, Joe Christmas was an unceasingly introspective and deeply unsettled man of interracial parentage seeking a place in a resolutely segregated society. Subsequently, Faulkner himself spoke of Joe Christmas as a commentary on institutional racism:

That was his tragedy, that to me was the tragic central idea of the story – that he didn't know what he was, and there was no way possible in life for him to find out. Which to me is the most tragic condition a man could find himself in.<sup>126</sup>

Faulkner himself not only wrote of these problems, he also worked on behalf of structural change. One such endeavour entailed financial aid for sending black students to college. As contemporary African-American leader William Fox has stated: 'Faulkner was a link to a healthier reality. When it was impossible

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<sup>123</sup> Meriwether and Millgate 1968, p. 130.

<sup>124</sup> Meriwether and Millgate 1968, p. 183.

<sup>125</sup> Faulkner 1946, p. 652.

<sup>126</sup> Blotner and Gwynn 1959, p. 72.

to penetrate caste and class, he helped us believe in possibilities'.<sup>127</sup> Just as in the 1930s, Faulkner declared: 'I most sincerely wish to go on record as being unalterably opposed to Franco and Fascism',<sup>128</sup> (here one is reminded of Motherwell's *Spanish Elegies*), so in 1954 he denounced McCarthyism in a public interview (*Washington Evening Star*, 11 June 1954). In the course of this same interview, Faulkner was asked why blacks generally seemed to be superior in his novels. He replied: 'Maybe the Negro is the best. He does more with less than anybody else'.<sup>129</sup>

A profound point of intersection exists not only between Faulkner's treatment of displaced Afro-Americans and de Kooning's empathy with them, but also and equally significantly between Faulkner's focus on Native American culture and the aforementioned values of Pollock. When asked about the etymology of the word for the legendary county, Yoknapatawpha, which appears in his novels and stories, Faulkner explained: 'It's a Chickasaw Indian word. They were the Indians that we dispossessed in my country. That word means "water flowing slow through the flatland"'.<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, some of Faulkner's early stories and novels deal specifically with the alarming situation of Native Americans in US society. In a lengthy 1957 statement about the way that European civilisation was transplanted in what is now the US, Faulkner observed that this white culture had never been integrated with nature as had that of the Native Americans (who held land communally before the advent of colonialism). Faulkner elaborated: 'I think the ghost of that ravishment lingers in the land, that the land is inimical to the white man because of the unjust way in which it was taken'.<sup>131</sup>

Thus, de Kooning's identification with African-Americans and Pollock's concern with Native Americans helps to understand much more fully why de Kooning, for example, painted what he called the 'no-environment' and 'no-figures' of modern Western society.<sup>132</sup> His paintings from 1947–51 about the anxious rootlessness of urban life, with their partially obliterated letters derived from scrawled graffiti, along with old billboards, evoke an alien environment. But while many critics would like to see de Kooning's works and those of all the other Abstract Expressionists as signifying the ahistorical 'condition humaine' of some existentialist authors, it would be more illuminating to look at these

127 Pearson 1988, p. 5H.

128 Cited in Mitgang 1986, p. C18.

129 Meriwether and Millgate 1968, p. 79.

130 Meriwether and Millgate 1968, pp. 133–4.

131 Blotner and Gwynn 1959, p. 43.

132 Sandler 1970, p. 131 and p. 133.

works as signifiers for specific historical problems intrinsic to post-war US society and to the logic of domination on which late capitalism is structurally based. Furthermore, if we do in fact examine the position on racism and capitalism of the existentialist writer with whom the Abstract Expressionists were most familiar (as Dore Ashton has compellingly shown in some of her books), we find that Jean-Paul Sartre attributed neither the existence of domestic racism nor that of Western imperialism to an unavoidable 'human condition'.<sup>133</sup>

Sartre, who was a lifelong socialist, wrote one of his first plays, *The Respectful Prostitute* (1946), about the quite objectionable and historically avoidable race relations in the Southern part of the US. An intense admirer of William Faulkner's novels, about which he wrote some fine literary criticism, Sartre was always in the vanguard of international support for Third World liberation movements in Algeria, in Cuba, and in Vietnam.<sup>134</sup> Consistent with this view was the publication by Sartre in the inaugural issue of his journal, *Les Temps modernes* (1 October 1945), of an essay by the Afro-American writer Richard Wright, who at one point was a member of the Communist Party as well as an author of an extremely controversial novel on race relations in the United States, *Native Son* (1940). Similarly, in 1961, Sartre wrote a striking preface to Frantz Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre* (The Wretched of the Earth).<sup>135</sup>

### Abstract Expressionism and Movements in the 1960s

Meyer Schapiro charged in 1937 that some avant-garde artists in the early twentieth century were indifferent to the conditions of colonial victims even as they drew on the artforms of these exploited people (some of the Fauvists and Futurists obviously come to mind here).<sup>136</sup> Such an accusation cannot be fairly made against the Abstract Expressionists, as the aforementioned discussion should indicate. Nor can one plausibly contend that the Abstract Expressionists remained 'apolitical' with respect to indigenous cultures, since their decision to assimilate these visual languages *on equal terms with European art* during one of the most ethnocentric periods in US history constituted a choice replete with ideological import, hence also with political implications. Significantly, the Abstract Expressionists' endorsement of non-Eurocentric cultural values,

133 Ashton 1972, pp. 174–92.

134 Sartre 1975 [1960].

135 Sartre 1968, pp. 7–34.

136 Schapiro 1978 [1937], p. 201.



marginalised cultural practices, and alternative readings of progress, helps to illuminate a particular passage in Meyer Schapiro's 1957 defence of Abstract Expressionism, in which he wrote: 'painting and sculpture today may seem to be opposed to the general trend of life. Yet in such opposition, these arts declare their humanity'.<sup>137</sup>

From the 1930s to the present, members of the Abstract Expressionist group have taken stands against fascism and racism, as well as against US intervention abroad. Aside from being connected in the 1930s with progressive organisations like the American Artists Congress, Jackson Pollock painted a lyrical figurative work in 1937 of black sharecroppers harvesting cotton and Philip Guston, whom Pollock knew from high school, painted works in the early 1930s of the Ku Klux Klan, in order to focus on the barbarism and ignorance of such groups. Not surprisingly one of the strongest Abstract Expressionist paintings on behalf of racial equality was by Norman Lewis. This small black and white all-over entitled *Klu Klux* (1963), which shares a formal affinity with de Kooning's paintings from the late 1940s, features very oblique allusions to Klansmen and flames in the night. While Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb wrote in the 1940s of *equalling* the art and culture of indigenous peoples in Africa, the South Pacific, or of aboriginal America, Pollock and de Kooning identified with the cultures that survived from these groups ravaged by colonialism.<sup>138</sup>

Starting in the late 1950s, the Abstract Expressionists took increasingly bold positions against both imperialism abroad and racism at home, as the Civil Rights Movement (which began in 1955) gained momentum. While de Kooning and others spoke out against the Vietnam War, the anti-war movement in the artworld during the 1960s was led by second generation Abstract Expressionist Rudolf Baranik.<sup>139</sup> Among those of the first generation, Ad Reinhardt was the one most often involved on all fronts and his caricatures of Eurocentrism as well as of imperialism are exemplary here. He was at the momentous 1963 march on Washington D.C. led by the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. In 1964, Reinhardt donated paintings for auction on behalf of the Congress for Racial Equality, while also serving on the executive committee of artists for *SANE*. As an opponent of the Vietnam War and of US imperialism, Reinhardt served both with the Student Nonviolent Co-ordinating Committee and with the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation.<sup>140</sup> Similarly, Barnett Newman was a prominent supporter of both the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-war

137 Schapiro 1978 [1957], p. 217.

138 Newman 1970 [1946], p. 70.

139 Schwartz 1971 pp. 97–105.; and Cox 1982, pp. 105–28.

140 Cox 1982, pp. 109–10.

demonstrations of the 1960s, all of which moved him to organise an anti-Daley art exhibition in response to the brutality that the Chicago Mayor unleashed on people during 1968.<sup>141</sup> Fittingly, one of Newman's major pieces of sculpture, the *Broken Obelisk* located in Houston at the De Menil Foundation, is dedication to Martin Luther King Jr, with Newman's consent and in spite of the storm of conservative criticism generated by this dedication in 1970. (Credit must also go to the forceful and unpopular stand taken by the patrons here, namely, members of the De Menil family.)<sup>142</sup>

In their efforts on behalf of embattled minority culture inside the US and in favour of self-determination for Third World countries, the Abstract Expressionists bring to mind an important fact. The force that finally attenuated the hold of McCarthyism and the Cold War mentality (although neither was eliminated as an ongoing factor in US history) was the conjunctural phenomenon known as 'the 1960s', with its various tendencies towards civil liberties and human rights aligned to other forces aimed at rupturing with repressive social practices. By the very nature of the visual languages and cultural traditions they chose to use, *the Abstract Expressionists provided an important precedent for the counter-cultural insurgency of the 60s*. The fact that mainstream texts (and even some left analyses) persist in reducing Abstract Expressionism to the *personal* creation in Eurocentric terms of 'isolated' geniuses is precisely what precluded a multi-cultural understanding of this art as an arresting convergence of Third World visual languages with Western art forms from both high art and low culture.

Here it is important to distinguish the Abstract Expressionists' engagement with non-Western cultures from the type of usage that has been sponsored by the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, both of which frequently depend on patronage from corporate capital. (Nonetheless, it does not follow that because these museums sometimes serve the interests of multinational capitalism, as Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach have shown, that they simply 'reflect' *the* ideology of this system and in no way involve progressive possibilities or contradictory tendencies.) The extraordinary paradox, whereby the US corporate destruction of non-Western cultures has helped finance exhibitions of Third World art, has been more deftly addressed in the work of Hans Haacke than anywhere else. While his *Metromobilitan* (1985) called attention to the way an exhibition of African Art at the Met was financed by Mobil Oil, long a collaborator with the South African apartheid system,

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141 Janson 1968, p. 40.

142 Snell 1971, pp. 43–9.

Haacke's *On Social Grease* (1975) concisely encapsulated both the logic of cultural underdevelopment and the patronising attitude concomitant with it.<sup>143</sup>

In one panel of *Social Grease*, we hear from Nelson Rockefeller, whose 'love' of primitive art and non-Western culture has been partly responsible for the public focus given these works in the Met. As Rockefeller admitted: 'I am not really concerned with what the artist means, it is not an intellectual operation – it is what I feel'.<sup>144</sup> Here then, we see the accuracy of Schapiro's 1937 prophesy about 'the preservation of certain forms of native culture in the interest of imperialist power',<sup>145</sup> even as the process of 'modernisation' directed by corporate capital normally devalues and sometimes eradicates popular culture in the Third World. As Haacke's work makes clear, the 'universal' exhibitions in the US of non-Western art have all too often been used to pre-empt a presentation of this art on behalf of self-determination in the Third World.

Significantly, some recent works that protest this statement of affairs – rather than disclosing its hidden logic as does Haacke – are by Robert Motherwell. For the United Nations' travelling exhibition 'Art Against Apartheid' (which was intentionally mounted *without* corporate sponsorship), Robert Motherwell did a piece entitled *Drunk on Eraser Fluid* (1979) about the self-intoxicated system of governmental censorship in a country that remains of paramount importance to US capital.<sup>146</sup> Furthermore, in 1984–5, Motherwell did some prints in honour of Bartolomé de las Casas, the priest whose defence of human rights for Native Americans in the sixteenth century has earned him an honourable place within such liberation movements in Latin America as the Sandinista Front in Nicaragua and the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front in El Salvador. All of this, in light of the aforementioned discussion, explains why Latin American artists can both oppose US dominance in the Americas *and* draw on the progressive aspects of art done in the US without promoting cultural imperialism in their own countries.

In calling William Faulkner his master (during his 1982 Nobel Prize Lecture), Gabriel García Márquez not only reminded us of *why* a Nicaraguan painter and Sandinista partisan like Boanerges Cerrato could build on certain aspects of Jackson Pollock's visual imagery, but also of *how* both these cultural acts are part of a larger struggle over whose interpretation of the past will prevail. For as Walter Benjamin once observed:

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143 Craven 1982b, pp. 21–5.

144 Craven 1982b, p. 24.

145 Schapiro, 1978[1937], pp. 200–1.

146 Craven, 1985a, pp. 98–100.

Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins ... The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule.<sup>147</sup>

### Postscript: The Situation of the US Left in the 1940s and 1950s

When one considers the ambience of anti-Communist hysteria that prevailed in the US from the mid-1940s through the late 1950s, not to mention the illegality of being a member of the Communist Party, it is hardly surprising that the Abstract Expressionists (whether they were socialists, social democrats, or anarchists), did not directly affirm socialism even though they deftly criticised capitalism throughout the period. (The nature of their ideological critique of capitalism has been addressed at length in an earlier article.)<sup>148</sup> Nor is it surprising that on at least one occasion some of the Abstract Expressionists themselves were pressured into criticising Picasso's membership in the French Communist Party. Bertolt Brecht, for example, also succumbed to this climate of intimidation when in 1947, during testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, he denied ever applying for membership in the Communist Party. Furthermore, it should also be remembered that even in non-repressive periods there have often been socialists and anarchists who have sharply criticised the USSR as well as the Communist Party in the US.

The necessary obliquity of progressive positions in the decade of McCarthyism should not be construed as a transition to indulgent 'apoliticism' on the part of the Abstract Expressionists,<sup>149</sup> whose engagement with cultural practices from the Third World meant that *their visual language per se* was 'subversive' in relation to the McCarthyists' ethnocentric definition of cultural values. Furthermore, this art was produced in the context of an intensified post-war US intervention that resulted in what Latin American intellectuals have called 'ethnocide'. It is to this problem – that of the divergent political and ideological dimensions of the visual languages with which the Abstract Expressionists in turn shaped their own work (in ways that were both good *and* bad) – that we must turn in subsequent critiques of this group. In doing so, we will have to go beyond the outmoded idea that the political importance of art is merely

147 Benjamin 1969, pp. 255–7.

148 Craven 1990, pp. 71–102 (Chapter 28 of this book).

149 Cockcroft 1974, pp. 39–41, and Guilbaut 1983, pp. 77 ff.

equal to consciously declared 'content', just as we will jettison such notions as 'apolitical' art, 'neutral' visual languages, totally 'resolved' artworks, and 'non-contradictory' ideologies. When this theoretical shift has been accomplished, we will be in a better position to grasp both the progressive and regressive tendencies of Abstract Expressionism.

Yet the bleakness of this period notwithstanding, there was neither a 'surrender' by the US left nor a 'de-Marxification' of the North American intelligentsia, as some art historians have erroneously maintained.<sup>150</sup> Indeed, in a recent award-winning study of the left throughout the Americas in this century, Orlando Núñez Soto (who is one of the leading theoreticians in the Sandinistia Front of Nicaragua) has noted that it was from certain universities and journals in the US 'that the most creative Marxist thinking began to emerge in the 1950s'.<sup>151</sup> In the forefront of this new chapter in socialist scholarship was *Monthly Review* (1949), which throughout this entire epoch published progressive critiques of the US, including I.F. Stone's momentous analysis of the Korean War.<sup>152</sup> From this group of Marxist economists around *Monthly Review* arose a school of thinkers who built the foundation for the development of Latin American dependency theory in the 1960s. Among the leading figures of the Monthly Review School were Paul Sweezy, Leo Huberman (a friend of art historian Meyer Schapiro, whose editorial help he praised),<sup>153</sup> Harry Braverman, Harry Magdoff, and perhaps the most significant economist for the creation of dependency theory, namely Paul Baran. It was Baran's *The Political Economy of Growth* (Monthly Review Press, 1957) that first included the argument that true capitalist development was disallowed for the Third World by the very nature of multinational capitalism. The result, he observed, was the phenomenon of underdevelopment involving the domination of Latin America by Western capital.<sup>154</sup>

By the way he showed that multinational capitalism because of its concentration in the West would undermine the productive forces of the Third World, Baran opened the door for major theoretical breakthroughs leading to the advent of the dependency school in the US, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Through the subsequent studies of such scholars as André Gunder Frank, Teotonio Dos Santos, Rui Mauro Marini, Henrique Cardoso, and Jaime Wheelock Román, dependency theory provided a sophisticated new critical frame-

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150 Guilbaut, 1983, Chapter 1.

151 Burbach and Soto 1987, p. 35.

152 Stone 1952.

153 Huberman 1936, Preface.

154 Burbach and Soto 1987, p. 35.

work for understanding both how economic dependency shaped the internal formations of Latin America and how the Western core countries of the world economy exercised hegemony over countries in the periphery of this order. As Orlando Núñez Soto has observed:

Dependency theory was especially important because it marked the first fundamentally new school of thought on political economy to be developed with contributions from radical intellectuals in both the United States and Latin America ... By the early 1970s virtually every major university in the United States and in Latin America was influenced in some way by dependency theory, and virtually all revolutionary parties or organizations, including the Communist parties, had adopted dependency theory as their framework for understanding the relations between the metropolitan centers and the periphery.<sup>155</sup>

Aside from the work of *Monthly Review*, there were other achievements of substantial import by the left even in the darkest days of the Cold War. In 1951, I.F. Stone founded the remarkable *I.F. Stone Weekly*, which throughout the McCarthy period and its aftermath provided an alternative viewpoint for assessing the post-war epoch. While Stone also wrote for *The Nation*, a left-liberal weekly that barely survived the McCarthy witch-hunts (which in this case were led by art critic Clement Greenberg),<sup>156</sup> art historian Meyer Schapiro served on the editorial board of *Dissent* (1953), a social-democratic as well as socialist publication critical of both Western capitalism and Eastern bloc socialism. Of note in the 1950s for analysing the non-Western cultures that influenced Abstract Expressionism was the birth in the US of a Marxist approach to anthropology led by Eleanor Burke Leacock and Eric Wolf (and later to encompass the work of James Clifford), who launched sustained reconsiderations of colonialism and imperialism in order to explain the historical construction of *machismo*, patriarchy, and ethno-centrism.<sup>157</sup>

In 1955, Herbert Marcuse – a member of the Frankfurt School who, like Leo Löwenthal, chose to remain in the US – published *Eros and Civilization*, his brilliant study interrelating the thought of Marx, Freud, and Schiller. By the way he grounded alienation and revolutionary change in Freud's concept of 'the return of the repressed', Marcuse provided a point of intersection both for

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155 Burbach and Soto 1987, p. 36.

156 Cox 1982, pp. 150–1.

157 Leacock 1982, pp. 257–76.

the Surrealist belief in 'natural' insurrection and for the Abstract Expressionist affirmation of 'spontaneity' as an inherently progressive force based on human nature. It was to be of more than passing significance for the 1960s that Marcuse (probably the most influential contemporary Western thinker of the period) and Abstract Expressionism (the primary foil or notable starting point for most of what occurred in New York after the 1950s) both linked structural change to, among other things: the transformation of culture, the re-evaluation of ethnicity, a critique of capitalism, and the transvaluation of social mores as dissected by Freud.<sup>158</sup>

Aside from these abovementioned progressive developments, which were more than counterbalanced in the 1950s by the forces of reaction inside the US, there were some external factors that further attenuated the already precarious position of the Abstract Expressionists and all other dissenters on the left whether they were anarchists, social-democrats, socialists, or communists. Chief among these factors was the disturbing state of the USSR under Stalin, which makes clear why none of the Abstract Expressionists – unlike the Cold War liberals – ever believed that one had to choose between Truman's 'America' or Stalin's 'Russia'. In fact, the policies on art of Zhadanov, Stalin's Minister of Culture, have recently been condemned not only by leading Soviet authors, such as Yevtushenko and Voznesensky, but also by General Secretary Gorbachev and the Communist Party as a whole at the Plenary Session in November 1987.<sup>159</sup>

It was, then, this paradoxical and quite repressive context of the 1950s that, in addition to Cold War hysteria in the US, led certain sectors of the US government to mount operations on behalf of circulating exhibitions of artworks by dissident artists, such as the Abstract Expressionists. Revealingly, covert involvement by the CIA in funding these exhibitions was necessary because of the overt government censorship of the arts then rampant in the McCarthy years of the US.<sup>160</sup> Eva Cockcroft has, in a well-known article, outlined the nexus of relationships involving CIA operatives and MOMA officials (and, indeed, former CIA agent Thomas Braden has boasted in print of this network) whereby Abstract Expressionism was exhibited abroad as 'representative' of US culture.<sup>161</sup> Serge Guilbaut, who has advanced the Cockcroft interpretation with qualified success by showing the way that art dealers constructed an ethnocentric ideological reading of Abstract Expressionism, has rightly observed that

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158 Marcuse 1955, pp. 28–43.

159 N.A. 1987, pp. 1–6.

160 Cockcroft 1974, pp. 39–41.

161 Braden 1967, pp. 10–14.

North American 'Avant-garde radicalism did not "sell out", it was borrowed for the anti-Communist cause'.<sup>162</sup>

Yet there has been considerable exaggeration on both the right and the left about the degree of success enjoyed by the CIA and Cold War liberals in making Abstract Expressionism a celebratory signifier of late capitalism along with US hegemony. This is the case in spite of the way mainstream art historians unhesitatingly speak for entire countries and even continents when they congratulate the New York artworld on its global 'triumph'. While Cockcroft and Guilbaut are surely convincing in their descriptions of what art-dealers, government propagandists, and formalist critics *intended* Abstract Expressionism to signify, there remains considerable doubt concerning the scope of this Cold War signification and the coherence of its ideological import.

As the previously cited poll of US citizens indicated, Abstract Expressionism even in the US frequently signifies not the legitimacy of the existing order in conjunction with high cultures, but rather the 'illegitimacy' of art experts and the culture they represent, all of which supposedly involves the 'duping' of 'ordinary' people.<sup>163</sup> This very pervasive, perhaps even ascendant, populist view is simultaneously egalitarian in claim and anti-intellectual in character (in addition to being ethnocentric), thus being a confused mixture of reactionary and progressive sentiments. A revealing product of this populist view was circulated during 1982 in publications like *Sports Illustrated* and on behalf of the Olympics. In this image, the basketball skills of Bill Russell supposedly produced an easy 'action painting' in the manner of Pollock (thus signifying the whimsical affinity between the two, or perhaps the artistry of professional basketball players?).

In a recent interview, critic Lawrence Alloway has also raised important questions about the assumed signification of Abstract Expressionism in Great Britain, where it was first circulated by the CIA and Cold War liberals. He noted, as a good friend of Barnett Newman, that this artist would have 'deplored anything that suggested he was a defender of imperialism or a lackey of the Rockefellers'.<sup>164</sup> As for the reaction afforded Abstract Expressionism when it was shown in England, Alloway observed:

If one looks over the reception of Abstract Expressionism in the early days, it was rejected both by the artworld and by the general public ...

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<sup>162</sup> Guilbaut 1983, p. 143 and p. 202.

<sup>163</sup> Kilman 1985, p. 3.

<sup>164</sup> Alloway 1987, pp. 130–1.



In fact, the presence of *New American Painting* [1958–59] at the Tate Gallery received grudging and ignorant reviews. This art was not the way to solicit good cheer among foreign governments ... After the show at the Tate, I collected the reviews together and wrote an article ... detailing the failure of British critics to deal with this show: such as saying things like in Pollock's *Number One*, in 1948, he has slapped the canvas with his hands. In the critic's opinion [John Russell's, whose Eurocentrism is hardly a matter for debate], it was not the canvas that should have been slapped.<sup>165</sup>

Considerably broadening and extending Alloway's point is the fact that progressive artists from Nicaragua, Cuba, and elsewhere in Latin America understood Abstract Expressionism in much more sophisticated terms than that of any monolithic 'cultural imperialism'. For these artists, many of whom are unquestionably revolutionaries, Abstract Expressionism signifies an *art of the Americas* grounded in the cultural practices of Native Americans, Afro-Americans, and Hispanics, as well as in those of the European avant-garde. As such, Abstract Expressionism entails a much larger field of possibilities, both progressive and reactionary, than the Eurocentric accounts of most mainstream apologists would otherwise permit.

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165 Ibid.

## New Documents: The Unpublished FBI Files on Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, and Adolph Gottlieb

In cubist paintings one finds a discipline, a consciousness, an order that implies man can not only control and create his world, but ultimately free himself completely from a brutal, barbaric existence ... The way to enrich or socialize painting is to get more and more people to paint, to use and handle colors – not to acquire skills of illustration. Mondrian, like Marx, saw the disappearance of works of art when the environment itself became an aesthetic reality. In its dissatisfaction with ordinary experience, the impoverished reality of present-day society, an abstract painting stands as a challenge to disorder and disintegration. Its activity implies a conviction of something constructive in our own time.

AD REINHARDT<sup>1</sup>



Just as the last few years have witnessed a revival of interest in the sublime among post-structuralists such as Jean-François Lyotard, there has been a recent revival of McCarthyist invective against prominent figures on the left, some of whom were associated with the Abstract Expressionists.<sup>2</sup> Meyer Schapiro, for example, was attacked in the January 1992 issue of *The American Spectator* for his ‘imperishable faith in socialism’, while the late I.F. Stone is now being assailed yet again as a purported ‘KGB agent’ by a former staff member of the House Committee on Un-American Activities.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, this neo-McCarthyist position is being reasserted even as the triumphalist mainstream

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1 Reinhardt 1991, pp. 48–9.

2 For support in writing this paper I should like to thank the staff of the Archives of American Art of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington D.C., and the staff of the Tate Gallery Liverpool, particularly Penelope Curtis and Anne MacPhee. In addition I should thank J. Kevin O'Brien, Director of the Freedom of Information-Privacy Acts Section, Information Management Division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Department of Justice, Washington D.C.

3 *The New York Times*, 13 August and 26 September 1992. See also Guttenplan 1992, pp. 312–13.

interpretation of the Cold War's termination – that is, as a 'victory' for monopoly capitalism and as a vindication of the 'American Way' – is being rendered ever less tenable both by new historical documents and by recent historical developments.

In what follows I shall examine some of this new material, specifically US Government documents that I have only recently obtained through the Freedom of Information Act (F.O.I.A.). These clearly demonstrate the national security threat perceived as being posed in this period by Ad Reinhardt to a notable degree and by Mark Rothko along with Adolph Gottlieb to a lesser extent. This new material will help to consolidate and to extend the theme put forth at the Myth-Making exhibition.

In 1966, one year before the untimely death of Ad Reinhardt and four years prior to Mark Rothko's tragic suicide, the United States Congress finally passed the F.O.I.A., which for the first time allowed private citizens to have access to records involving the clandestine surveillance of US citizens considered subversive by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (set up in 1908 as the domestic investigative arm of the Department of Justice). According to a congressional audit of 1975 by the General Office of Accounting, there were as many as 160,000 open files concerning 'subversive matters' in the US.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the decade of the 1980s, however, which was generally a period of right-wing resurgence, there was a persistent effort by the Reagan Administration to eviscerate the F.O.I.A. and thus the civil liberties as well as political rights guaranteed by it. This strategy of constraint was advanced through Executive Order 12356 (1982) and through an even more constrictive presidential decree of 1986 – a decree which was put forth shortly after the 1985 disclosure of records through the F.O.I.A. that Ronald Reagan had served as an FBI informant, known as 'Agent T-10,' throughout the 1940s while being a member of the Screen Actors' Guild.<sup>5</sup>

Of these three artists whose political actions were deemed subversive by the FBI,<sup>6</sup> Reinhardt's file is far and away the most extensive. It runs to 123 pages while Rothko's extends to 21 pages and Gottlieb's numbers only five pages. The remarkable size of Reinhardt's file (of which only 100 of the 123 pages were

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4 Mitgang 1989, p. 9.

5 Mitgang 1989, pp. 15–17.

6 The public presentation at the Myth-Making exhibition critical forum, Tate Gallery Liverpool, for the very first time anywhere of the formerly top secret government documents about Reinhardt, Rothko, and Gottlieb attests both to the ongoing, if also limited, access still permitted by the Freedom of Information Act and also to the heavily censored form in which these documents will appear (if they are released at all) owing to the executive manoeuvres of the Reagan and Bush Administration.

released, with a sizeable portion of those that were released being blotted out for reasons of 'national security') makes it the third largest file on an artist to be obtained to date. The biggest FBI file is of course Picasso's, which is 187 pages in length,<sup>7</sup> followed by Ben Shahn's, which consists of 146 pages.<sup>8</sup>

A particularly sobering fact about Reinhardt's file, who by his own concession was a lifelong socialist, is that every memorandum about him from 1941–66 is labelled with the coded designation of 'SM-C' or 'Security Matter-C,' which if spelled out in lay terms means the following: *According to the FBI, along with other government agencies, the subject constitutes a national security threat and is a subversive because his or her sympathies for communism and/or socialism make him or her a 'potential' collaborator with foreign agents.* As Herbert Mitgang has noted, these secret dossiers 'cast a shadow of criminality' over the subjects whose actions they monitored. The documents in Reinhardt's file include an eight page FBI memorandum of 16 October 1941 (the earliest report in his dossier), various clandestine reports throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, and his dossier ends with a five page report submitted on 1 November 1966, which was filed a few months before Reinhardt's death. The material compiled by the FBI incorporates substantial information that also originated with other government agencies, including the State Department, foreign embassies of the US, the US Navy, and the Counter-intelligence branch of the US Marine Corps.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, so concerned were these various branches of the US Government with Reinhardt's politics that page one of the earliest FBI memorandum states:

Subject is being considered for the custodial detention list. Description set out. Custodial detention memorandum being prepared.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Mitgang 1989, p. 1 and p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> Mitgang 1989, pp. 212–14. A 1951 memorandum in Shahn's file states, for example, that although Shahn had 'denied being a Communist', he was nonetheless 'identified with pro-Communist activities' through the making of posters 'for various trade unions in New York City, and he has been very successful in the modern art field'. A subsequent FBI memorandum in 1952, the year Charlie Chaplin was being forced to leave the US, specifically mentions Shahn as a 'candidate for deportation'.

<sup>9</sup> Because this material is presently unpublished and is unpaginated except for the number of pages within each separate government memorandum, I shall refer to the documents by means of these localised references. In the future, I shall donate all of this material to the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, D.C.

<sup>10</sup> F.B.I. File on Ad Reinhardt, Archives of the Department of Justice, Washington, D.C., unpublished, 16 October 1941, p. 1.

Among the reasons given were Reinhardt's 'membership and apparent activity with the Communist Party'.<sup>11</sup> Here it should be noted that a few months later, in 1942, Executive Order 9066 authorised the US Army to set up just such a detention camp for every Japanese American on the West Coast, so that 110,000 people were held prisoner in these concentration camps by the US military for over three years. Furthermore, in 1950 the US Congress passed the Internal Security Act, which allowed for the establishment of more such detention camps during periods of an 'internal security emergency'. Thus suspected subversives such as Reinhardt and Shahn could have been held indefinitely *without* trial (incidentally, this law was repealed only in 1968).<sup>12</sup>

A 23 page FBI document in Reinhardt's file is dated 5 January 1955 – this was after Senator Joseph McCarthy had been censured by the US Senate. Most of the first page, like many of the subsequent 22 pages, has been blackened out owing to an exemption called 'b 1'. First authorised in 1986 by the Reagan Administration, this exemption reads as follows:

(A) specifically authorised under criteria established by an Executive Order to be kept secret in the interest of national defense or foreign policy and (B) ... properly classified pursuant to such Executive Order.<sup>13</sup>

In short, we cannot know all the details about the Department of Justice's findings in the Reinhardt case, since such general knowledge, according to the Reagan Administration, would threaten 'national security'.

Among the list of groups in this 1955 report – which identifies 'subversive aliases' of Reinhardt for the first time (such as the pseudonym 'Daryl Friedrich' that he evidently used when he was on the Editorial Council of *Soviet Russia Today* in 1937)<sup>14</sup> – are all the organisations classified as 'Communist Party Front Groups' with which Reinhardt either had worked or was still working. This lengthy list included the following organisations and institutions: Friends of the United American Artists Workshop; the ACA Gallery; Committee for the Defense of Public Education; the American Artists Congress; the Artists' League of America; the Book and Magazine Guild;<sup>15</sup> the Thomas Jefferson

11 F.B.I. File on Ad Reinhardt, p. 11.

12 Zinn 1980, pp. 407–08.

13 (1986, 4 December) Executive Order 10450: Explanation of Exemptions, (Washington, D.C., Department of Justice Publishing Wing) p. 1.

14 F.B.I. File on Ad Reinhardt, 5 January 1955, p. 1.

15 Which was affiliated with the United Office and Professional Workers of America, the CIO, the American Labor Party, and the American Committee For Peace and Democracy –

School;<sup>16</sup> the Civil Rights Congress;<sup>17</sup> the National Council of Arts, Sciences, and Professions;<sup>18</sup> the American Jewish Labor Council;<sup>19</sup> the American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born;<sup>20</sup> *New Masses*; and *Soviet Russia Today*.<sup>21</sup>

In 1948, Reinhardt had executed a series of drawings for a publication by the American Jewish Council and entitled *The Truth About Cohen*. A prominent feature of this publication that calls for a militant stand against all forms of racism, not just anti-Semitism, is the consistent identification of the class-based exploitation of workers with the socially divisive use of scapegoating by the ruling class. Several passages explicitly relate the logic of capitalist exploitation to the resurgence of anti-Semitism.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, some observations are in line here concerning the context of this 1948 pamphlet originating from the US left.

First, we must recall that four of the major figures among the first generation of Abstract Expressionists were Jewish (as was Reinhardt's second wife, Rita) – Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Lee Krasner and Adolph Gottlieb – at a time when some sectors of the US government were openly racist. The Truman Administration actually recruited over 100 scientists who had formerly served the Nazi Government in Germany to work in the US space programme and, in fact, the US government knowingly admitted as many as 10,000 former Nazis into the US during this period, since they were intransigent opponents

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the latter had been 'cited as subversive by Attorney General Tom Clark' on 21 September 1948.

- 16 Where Ad Reinhardt and painter Norman Lewis taught from 1946–1948 and which was 'designated as subversive by Attorney General pursuant to Executive Order 10450'. See F.B.I. File on Reinhardt, p. 11.
- 17 All commentary by the F.B.I. here is blotted out in accordance with 'national security' concerns. It was precisely his identification with this organisation that led to writer Dashiell Hammett's imprisonment for six months in 1951 after he refused to name the various other people who had been associated with this group, among whom were Ad Reinhardt and William Faulkner. In fact, it was his support of the 1951 position taken by the Civil Rights Congress in the Case of Willie McGee that led to Faulkner's being monitored by the FBI. See Mitgang 1989, pp. 37–42, 89–90.
- 18 Most of this entry is blackened out owing to the 'b 1' exemption, except for a portion stating that this group is 'a Communist Front' according to the 14 May 1951 *Guide to Subversive Organizations and Publications*.
- 19 Again, this entry is blotted out almost entirely, except for a reference to Executive Order 10450.
- 20 Blotted out, except for a citation of Executive Order 10450.
- 21 FBI File on Reinhardt, p. 14.
- 22 Ad Reinhardt Papers, Archives of American Art, Roll N/69–100: 395–412.

of 'communism'. As a member of the US Justice Department conceded in 1987, 'the United States was a haven for Nazi war criminals' throughout the late 1940s and 1950s.<sup>23</sup>

Second, we should remember that 1948, the year that Reinhardt's drawings appeared in the pamphlet by the American Jewish Council, was the same year that Robert Motherwell explicitly related an interest in the sublime to a critique of capitalism and it was around the same date when Barnett Newman told art critic Harold Rosenberg that 'if he and others could read it [my work] properly it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism'.<sup>24</sup>

Earlier in the 1940s in New York City, members of the Frankfurt School had addressed the 'anti-Semitic question' (a locution that they preferred to the 'Jewish question'). After having been affiliated with Columbia University for almost ten years, where he knew and had intellectual interchange with Meyer Schapiro, Max Horkheimer was hired by the American Jewish Committee in 1944 as the director of its newly created Department of Scientific Research. Under Horkheimer's direction, the department launched a multi-volume series of *Studies in Prejudice*, the most famous achievement of which was the volume entitled *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) that Adorno co-authored with three other scholars.<sup>25</sup> In their section on anti-Semitism in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (written in the US during 1943–4, and published in Amsterdam in 1947), Adorno and Horkheimer contended that Jews were prime targets of the totalitarian identity principle of instrumental rationality inherent to the capitalist mode of production, since Jews were then the most resolute repository of otherness and difference in a Western system predicated upon ever greater standardisation.<sup>26</sup>

Significantly, Ad Reinhardt had already drawn the ire of some US congressmen in 1944 (which he notes wittily in his 1966 Chronology) when he did a series of drawings for a pamphlet entitled *Races of Mankind* by Ruth Benedict, a professor of anthropology at Columbia University.<sup>27</sup> In this publication the issues of racism and class-based inequality were deftly addressed by Reinhardt in 12 drawings. Particularly impressive also is the way that Reinhardt dealt with the problem of ethnocentrism, or better Eurocentrism, by underscoring the richly multicultural nature of Western cuisine.<sup>28</sup> On several occasions in

23 Rosenthal 1987, p. E2.

24 Newman 1990, p. 251.

25 Adorno, Franklin-Brunswick, Levinson and Sanford 1950.

26 Adorno and Horkheimer 1972 [1944], pp. 204–33.

27 Benedict and Weltfish 1943. For Reinhardt's 'Chronology' see Reinhardt 1962, pp. 4–8.

28 Benedict and Weltfish 1943, p. 24.

these drawings, Reinhardt illuminates the ways in which cultural practices and national traits have been historically constructed, not biologically mandated.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the way in which Reinhardt constantly placed the term 'races' in quotation marks, thus highlighting its problematic standing, reminds us of the more recent observations by Henry Gates and others that the category of race is of little merit to biologists. This is the case because the range of physical variations within 'racial' groups is often more pronounced than the degree of general physical differences between various 'racial' groups.<sup>30</sup>

The seventh memorandum in Reinhardt's file, which is from 22 April 1958, exemplifies yet again the wish of some figures in US government posts to punish Reinhardt for his political commitments. After Reinhardt applied for a passport and denied ever having been a member of the Communist Party, the State Department on 16 April 1958 secretly requested more information about 'his denial of Communist Party membership'.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, people in the State Department asked the representatives of the Department of Justice 'if there was sufficient information upon which to initiate prosecution under section 1001 or 1542, Title 18, U.S. Code' (22 June 1958).<sup>32</sup> Fortunately, however, no further action was taken to prosecute Reinhardt for perjury.

Subsequent FBI reports (such as the one on 8 November 1960) make clear that Reinhardt's travels abroad were monitored by the US government.<sup>33</sup> This entry from 1960 notes, for example, that 'there was no indication the subject travelled to a Soviet oriented country'.<sup>34</sup> Later files likewise detail Reinhardt's other foreign travels, but it was in the early 1960s with his support for liberation movements in the Third World through his involvement with anti-imperialist groups that the FBI and other US government agencies, including the State Department and the Department of Defense, reintensified their surveillance of Reinhardt. Furthermore, it was at this time that Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb were added to the clandestine purview of the FBI owing to their commitment to various progressive movements of the early 1960s.

An FBI memorandum of 25 January 1962, again labelled 'Security Matter-C', details Reinhardt's involvement with the 'US Friends of Mexico' group – a group that included other members of the Abstract Expressionists' circle aside from Rothko and Gottlieb, namely, David Smith, and less directly Rudolf

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29 Benedict and Weltfish 1943, pp. 14–15.

30 Appiah 1985, p. 21.

31 F.B.I. File on Ad Reinhardt, 22 April 1958, p. 1.

32 F.B.I. File on Ad Reinhardt, 22 June 1958, p. 5.

33 F.B.I. File on Ad Reinhardt, 11 November 1960, p. 1.

34 Ibid.



Baranik and May Stevens.<sup>35</sup> In addition, many prominent figurative painters were involved with this group, the most well known of whom were Ben Shahn, Jacob Lawrence, Jack Levine, and Philip Evergood, as well as both Isaac and Moses Soyer. The specific composition of this group also reminds us that in the future, more broad-ranging discussions of Abstract Expressionism will not only discuss how these paintings related to those by other groups of abstract artists from Canada, Europe, and Latin America, but also how the concerns of the Abstract Expressionists were sometimes interrelated with those of figurative artists such as Shahn or Evergood. To approach the work along these lines – and the paintings of Rudolf Baranik, for example, provide a notable point of intersection for these two different tendencies – we shall have to advance beyond the tired conceptual framework of ‘modernism vs. realism’ to a less constrictive yet also more critical approach.

Both the FBI and the US State Department considered the ‘Artists Committee to Free Siqueiros’, which was the avowed aim of the ‘US Friends of Mexico’, to be an alarming organisation. David Alfaro Siqueiros, who was deported from the US in 1932 and who upon his re-entry in 1936 was Pollock’s teacher in an experimental workshop, was gaoled in 1960 by the Mexican government after he supported a demonstration in Mexico City that erupted in violence. Owing to a national law specifying harsh penalties for insurrectionary leaders that foment ‘social dissolution’, the judiciary branch of the Mexican Government had sentenced Siqueiros to eight years in prison. In establishing an artists’ committee to lobby for Siqueiros’s release, the above-noted artists signed public manifestos on Siqueiros’s behalf and also held a public art exhibition from 2–6 January in 1962 at the ACA Gallery.<sup>36</sup> As pages one and two of Reinhardt’s file for 25 February 1962 clearly show, the FBI did in fact send a secret agent to the art exhibition. This secret agent recorded that he saw no more than 25 people visit the gallery on the two days that he went there.<sup>37</sup>

Overlapping with Reinhardt’s FBI file during this period are those of Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, both of whom not only signed the statements in support of Siqueiros but also supported the anti-war movement, as well as the civil rights movement, from the very beginning. An 8 January 1963 communique from the US Embassy in Mexico to the US Department of State is included in Gottlieb’s folder.<sup>38</sup> This official report refers to the public letter’s appeal that

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35 FBI File on Ad Reinhardt, 25 January 1962, pp. 1–3. See also FBI File on Adolph Gottlieb, Memorandum from the US Department of State, 8 January 1963, pp. 1–3.

36 FBI File on Gottlieb, pp. 1–3.

37 FBI File on Reinhardt, 25 February 1962, pp. 1–2.

38 FBI File on Gottlieb, pp. 1–3.

Siqueiros be released from prison and notes that this appeal was the subject of a report in *The New York Times* on 31 December 1962. As the communication from Mexico City states:

The advertisement mentioned in the *Times* story was placed fairly prominently in *Excelsior*, one of Mexico's leading and conservative daily newspapers, on December 29. It was a salute to Siqueiros on his 66th birthday 'From the Intellectuals of the United States' and urged his release from prison so that 'he may continue enriching the art of Mexico and the world'. The advertisement was dated from New York on December 29 and 'signed' by a number of 'intellectuals', whose names are listed below as of possible interest to Washington's agencies.<sup>39</sup>

As was true of the information on Gottlieb produced by the FBI in 1965 but detailing earlier dissenting views against official US interests, the material in Rothko's file was also part of a report drawn up by the FBI at the request of the White House staff (11 January 1965), upon receiving a telegram signed by these two individuals<sup>40</sup> – a telegram that, as the FBI responses indicate (1 January 1965 and 4 June 1965) was a strong protest against US foreign policy in Southeast Asia.<sup>41</sup> The secret report on Rothko compiled by the FBI (listing his address as 'Russia,' where he was in fact born), included a subversive pseudonyms check which did not turn up any alias (as had been done in Reinhardt's case). However, it explicitly linked the 'Friends of Mexico' group with the new anti-interventionist movement that was just then beginning to emerge in the US. The FBI assessment, as detailed in the 4 June 1965 memorandum for Rothko's dossier, proceeds along rather ominous lines as follows, after the Siqueiros letter is summarised:

David Alfaro Siqueiros, a top Mexican Communist Party leader, had been imprisoned for several years for engaging in acts of 'social dissolution', that is, acting to dissolve illegally the Mexican Government. He reportedly had been engaged in activity in behalf of Soviet intelligence, and in 1940, was reported to have led an abortive attempt on the life of Leon Trotsky.

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39 Ibid.

40 FBI File on Mark Rothko, Memorandum to the White House (Special Assistant to the President, Marvin Watson), 11 January 1965, p. 1.

41 FBI File on Mark Rothko, Memorandum to the White House (Special Assistant to the President), 4 June 1965, p. 1.

On April 5, 1965, the F.B.I. received information that an individual by the name of Mark Rothko signed a 'Writers and Artists Protest' against the continuation of the present American policy in Vietnam. The protest was a plea to obtain funds in order to publish an advertisement in 'The New York Times' encouraging individuals to protest to the United States Government ...<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, and quite revealingly, it is clear that some of the material about Rothko's involvement with the inception of the anti-war movement was provided by the Head of the Counter-intelligence Branch of the US Marine Corps (5 April 1965).<sup>43</sup> All of this indicates that especially in the early and mid-1960s – that is, before the anti-war movement gained massive popular support (which occurred only around 1969–70) – the US government viewed such opposition to its war efforts, or rather 'police actions', as highly subversive if not treasonous. Occurring as it did at a time when the Latin American left was experiencing a resurgence inspired by the successes of the Cuban Revolution (including a recent victory in 1961 over US-backed counter-revolutionary forces that Reinhardt sardonically included in his own 1966 Chronology for the Jewish Museum Retrospective as 'the Bay of Pigs fiasco'),<sup>44</sup> this gesture of international solidarity against political repression of the left no doubt alarmed various government agents. And, in fact, as the extensively documented accounts of Noam Chomsky, Philip Agee (himself a former CIA agent in Ecuador), and others make clear, the CIA and the US State Department were even more active in counter-insurgency from the early 1960s onward throughout Latin America than had been the case previously.<sup>45</sup>

The reasons that the FBI domestically, and the CIA internationally, so strongly targeted this network of anti-imperialist movements and civil rights groups, and why several of the Abstract Expressionists would be viewed as subversive figures requiring secret surveillance, have been deftly summarised by political economist Paul Sweezy. In discussing why the Vietnam War was 'a turning point in the post-war history of U.S. imperialism', Sweezy observed that even before the United States plunged into the Vietnam morass, the combination of the burgeoning civil rights movement and the Cuban Revolution

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42 FBI File on Mark Rothko, 4 June 1965, pp. 1–3.

43 FBI File on Mark Rothko, Memorandum from Head, Counter-intelligence Branch, U.S. Marine Corps, 5 April 1965, pp. 1–4.

44 Reinhardt 1962, p. 8.

45 Chomsky and Hermann 1979.

had begun to radicalise a part of the white youth. This process notably intensified as the commitment of US troops to Vietnam increased, and as the return flow of casualties swelled. As the 1960s proceeded, these various forces potentiated each other. Thus, the domestic situation resulting from the war reached its nadir after Nixon's invasion of Cambodia in the spring of 1970. By the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, US imperialism found itself in a seriously weakened position, owing in part to the war itself and in part to the relative loss of economic power to its major capitalist allies-cum-rivals.<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, when we look back to the first major anti-interventionist manifesto published in *The New York Times*, a 'Declaration to [U.N.] Ambassador Adlai Stevenson' (18 April 1965), we find the names of Paul Sweezy and Leo Huberman (the co-editors of *Monthly Review*) along with that of *Dissent Magazine* editor Irving Howe and those of Ad Reinhardt, Rudolf Baranik, and May Stevens. The letter opened with the statement: 'We have watched in dismay as our government – by its actions in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic – has clearly violated the United Nations Charter, international law, and ... fundamental principles of human decency'.<sup>47</sup> As such, this group with the title of 'Artists and Writers Dissent', then urged Adlai Stevenson to resign as US Ambassador to the United Nations and to become a spokesperson for those who were opposed to the US Government's recourse 'to unilateral military interventions'.<sup>48</sup>

The FBI file on Reinhardt closes with several secret memoranda about his anti-war activities and one report from 1 November 1966 includes yet another round of subversive name checks to determine if Reinhardt were also active under any of his former aliases.<sup>49</sup> It is with this group of documents that Reinhardt's file concludes.

Artists associated with Abstract Expressionism did in fact produce several works of this period that were far more topical in orientation than was generally true of their art after the 1930s. Along with Rudolf Baranik's remarkable *Napalm Elegy Series* (1966–74), there was Barnett Newman's well-known 'lace-curtain' sculpture for Mayor Daly of Chicago after the 1968 police repression visited upon counter-cultural forces and anti-war groups during the National Convention of the Democratic Party. Shortly before his death, Ad Reinhardt even made one directly *engagé* political work, a lithograph entitled *No War*, and created in 1967 as a print/poster for an Artist and Writers Protest portfolio. This print is in the form of a standard US airmail postcard folded back to reveal

46 Sweezy 1989, pp. 5–6.

47 Ad Reinhardt Papers, Archives of American Art, Roll N/69–101: 0081.

48 Ibid.

49 FBI File on Ad Reinhardt, 1 November 1966, pp. 1–6.

both the address side and the side with the message. On one side it is addressed to 'War Chief, Washington, D.C., U.S.A.', while on the reverse side in Gothic calligraphy is one of Reinhardt's declarations through unqualified negation. The list of 24 negatives begins as follows:

No War  
No Imperialism  
No Murder  
No Bombing  
No Napalm  
...

On the side of the address, he provides one of his famous serial non-definitions of art's relationship to other phenomena (in this case, to War). This list of ten disavowals begins with the following:

No Art of War  
No Art in War  
No Art to War  
No Art on War  
No Art by War  
...

## A Legacy for the Latin American Left: Abstract Expressionism as Anti-Imperialist Art

Abstract artists were strong when the Revolution took place, and they were supporting the Revolution; therefore there was no negative identification with abstractionism.

RAÚL MARTÍNEZ<sup>1</sup>

• • •

It was decided that Cuban painting would have to be destroyed, in a manner of speaking ... We decided to use North American abstraction as our form, because in Cuba there was no tradition ... We also discovered that abstract art was the only weapon with which we could frighten people ... Then it seemed to us that our painting served as a means to raise consciousness.

RAÚL MARTÍNEZ<sup>2</sup>

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What I shall point to here ... are practices of negation in modernist art ... The very way that modernist art has insisted on its medium has been by ... having matter be the synonym for resistance.

T.J. CLARK<sup>3</sup>

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On the third anniversary of the Cuban Revolution, in January 1963, the new revolutionary government sponsored an exhibition in Havana with the title

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1 Raúl Martínez, Interview with Sandra Levinson, Havana, 1984. Videotape at the Centre for Cuban Studies in New York City.

2 Goldman 1994, p. 146.

3 Clark 2000, p. 78 and p. 81.

*Abstracto Expresionismo*. As the title of this show indicates, the visual language of Abstract Expressionism was identified both with the insurgent forces that had toppled the US-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista and with the art-world movement that had radically expanded the discursive field for cosmopolitan modernisms in Cuba. Moreover, this exhibition also made clear that the so-called socialist realism of the Soviet Union would find little favour in revolutionary Cuba. Indeed, Che Guevara condemned the latter in 1965 as a species of nineteenth-century French art that would only constrain artistic practice in a revolutionary setting where experimentalism was the order of the day.<sup>4</sup> The first Cuban edition of Che Guevara's most famous text on the culture of socialism explicitly contrasts examples of a newly validated Cuban modernism (in this case, semi-figurative paintings by René Portocarrero and Wifredo Lam, as well as the new art school at Cubanacán) with the stultifying visual forms of contemporary Soviet art, which are entitled 'Sobre los bases del siglo pasado'. As for the design of the book's cover, by an artist named Chago, it is clearly linked with the Russian Constructivism of the pre-Stalin era.

Painter and printmaker Raúl Martínez (1927–95), easily one of the most significant artists to work in Cuba from the 1950s till his death there in the 1990s, observed that the language of Abstract Expressionism was particularly important not only for opening up Cuban painting to a new international dialogue in the arts, but also for its power of cultural negation during this period. In this instance the artworks of Jackson Pollock, Joan Mitchell, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, and Bradley Tomlin Walker, among others, were recruited as a force for political dissent and aesthetic contumacy by Martínez, Guido Llinás, and Tomás Oliva. These painters operated within a broader force-field that was called *Los Once* from 1953 to 1955 and then *Los Cinco* from 1956 to 1963. Martínez has described the genesis of this modernist anti-movement as follows:

In 1953, the movement called *Los Once* was born. It was called *Los Once* [The Eleven] by accident because in actuality it was a large heterogeneous group formed in the first years of the Batista coup [1952]. There was a great fervour among the artists ... It was a question of consciousness; of taking a position both ethical and aesthetic. It was decided that Cuban painting would have to be destroyed, in a manner of speaking ... We had to look at this continent, not at Europe. We decided to use North American abstraction as our form, because in Cuba there was no tradition, there

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4 Guevara 1965. Also, see Cockcroft 1983, p. 4 on Fidel Castro's defence of abstract art.

was nothing to explore ... We also discovered that abstract art was the only weapon with which we could frighten people. When we mounted an exhibition, people were left in a state of shock. They said we didn't know how to paint, they attacked us. Then it seemed to us that our painting served as a means to raise consciousness ... The fight for liberty also took the form of the fight against the Biennial of 1953. Francisco Franco [of Spain] and Batista organized the Hispanic Biennial in Cuba. We established an Anti-Biennial, explaining that artists shouldn't exhibit because we were fighting against dictatorship ... We [also] attacked the [Pan American Union] exhibition in Venezuela, arguing that if artists were boycotting the Franco Biennial because of the Spanish dictatorship, why should they participate in Venezuela, which also had a dictator [Pérez Jiménez]. We used the example of Spain because it was dangerous to speak of the dictatorship in Cuba, though it was obvious to whom we were referring. Los Once later dissolved [in 1955] ... Rather than waiting until the group was destroyed from the outside, we decided to break it up ourselves.<sup>5</sup>

The negativity of this movement enjoyed a potent afterlife up through the early 1960s, especially in the Abstract Expressionist paintings of Martínez and Llinás. This negation did not come from the content of their pictorial images. Rather it came from the attitudes conveyed by the 'negative' visual language in which they worked. In short, their artwork articulated an ideological critique, a critique on the level of fundamental attitudes, but it did not contain any overt political message.

The concrete position of pictorial criticism for which they strove in this period was perhaps best summarised by Theodor Adorno, who in an essay from the early 1960s noted that some of the most effectively *engagé* art at present was that which was defamed as mere formalism. He then went on to contend that: 'Committed art in the proper sense is not intended to generate ameliorative measures, legislative gains or practical institutions ... but to work at the level of fundamental attitudes'.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in opposition to the doctrine of so-called 'socialist realism', Adorno observed that 'the idea of a "message" in art, even when the art itself is politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world's established order'.<sup>7</sup>

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5 Goldman 1994, pp. 145–8.

6 Adorno 1974b, pp. 412, 429–30.

7 Adorno 1974b, p. 429: 'Im Begriff des "message", der Botschaft von Kunst selbst, auch der politisch radikalen, steckt schon das weltfreundliche Moment'.



These observations definitely illuminate the 'Abstract Expressionist' paintings from the 1950s by Martínez and Llinás, especially those that notably enlarged the discursive field of modernism in Cuban during this period of revolutionary upheaval. There are, for example, extant works that date from the moment of most intense fighting by the revolutionary insurgents, with whom Martínez was in sympathy. Two of these paintings are *Fragment 1* of 1957, an oil on canvas (23 ½ × 34 ½ in.), and *Untitled* of 1958, another oil on canvas of more modest size (23 ½ × 28 ¾ in.), both of which are in the collection of the Cuban Museum of the Americas. To look at them is to recognise immediately the inter-image dialogue that was occurring with Abstract Expressionism from the United States, which Martínez had discovered while studying in Chicago during 1952–3.

The first painting from 1957 contains a dense, darkly orchestrated all-over space that decentres every effort at any hierarchical focus. Similarly, this image cancels out the tactile sensations suggested by Pollock's indexical skeins of surface-sitting lines, as in his magisterial *Autumn Rhythm*. In the Martínez painting there are rapid accents marked vertically by ascending lines, as well as horizontally by sprawling ones, in a pictorial field where figure-ground relations meld almost imperceptibly, and then disassociate with equal subtlety. This deftly contrasting feature helps to give the canvas a brooding tone that is nevertheless denied inertia by the quick-paced linear gestures.

As a composition it hovers tensely between states of formal resolution and dissolution, generating some components that expire and others that emerge with comparable force, so that the overall effect is one of grimness without rest, of grim restlessness. Analogies in tone and formal attributes do of course arise with the black paintings by de Kooning from the late 1940s or with the impressive gestural abstractions by Joan Mitchell from the late 1950s. Yet the air of negativity pervading the work by all three painters was nonetheless articulated by boldly different means in each case. Links to US Abstract Expressionism notwithstanding, the painting by Martínez stands as a distinctive contribution to the discursive field encompassing the three, rather than as a mere derivative reproduction of pictorial traits from 'el Norte'.

Viewed in relation to the noteworthy semi-figurative paintings by older Cuban vanguard artists like Victor Manuel (1897–1969) or Amelia Peláez (1896–68), as for example, *Interior with Columns* of 1951, several instructive traits are in evidence. The 1957 painting by Martínez insists on declaring what it is not, even as it implies the advent of something else yet to emerge definitively. It is a commanding image that hinges for its formal effect on pinpoint accents without conventional resolve in formal terms. Expectant if hardly hopeful, the canvas entitled *Fragments* by Martínez inaugurated a new type of pictorial negativ-

ity, without signifying resignation along the way. Even more quickly paced is Martínez's 1958 painting, which is more turbulent in its all-over movement and less indeterminate in its back-and-forth interplay of figure-ground relationships. Here again, but even more restlessly, the gestural brushstrokes alternate between a plethora of rapid fire black marks and a few passages of well-placed flourishes in low-value white or sombre blue.

The overriding ambience of negativity distinguishing both of Martínez's images links them to the New York School even as it distances them from the School of Paris's more upbeat and celebratory Art Informel. Their precarious state of hovering tension momentarily uniting the determined and the undetermined, along with their lack of any real sense of palette-knife clotted surface impasto, immediately marks off these dissident Cuban canvases from their period counterparts in Paris. The sullen, almost smouldering paintings by Martínez are rather at odds with the sumptuous and more high-keyed paintings of Nicolas de Stäel. Similarly, the all-over images of Martínez are less self-consciously elegant than the contemporary paintings by Pierre Soulages, in addition to being more bleak, and less light-hearted in tone than works by Bram van Velde. Moreover, the incandescent accents harboured by Martínez's works are dissimilar from the scintillating networks of lines that flicker across the pictorial expanses of Jean-Paul Riopelle's gorgeous paintings. As critic Luis Camnitzer has noted of Martínez's palette, he often 'painted in black and white as a reaction against the sweet colours of his predecessors [in Cuba]'.<sup>8</sup> Concerning any analogical links to the New York School, Camnitzer noted that the discursive interchange with Abstract Expressionism and Beat Literature occurred because Martínez and Los Once felt that 'abstract expressionism was a visual language uncontaminated by a political reality they opposed'.<sup>9</sup>

Another important artist from Cuba who was working in a vein of negative engagement was Guido Llinás (b. 1923). Perhaps the artist with the major claim to being the founder of Los Once and Los Cinco, Llinás is the only member of the original group still living in 2005. Before becoming a political dissident in 1953, Llinás, like Martínez, travelled in the United States, where he 'discovered Newman, Rothko, Pollock, and, above all, Kline, de Kooning, and Gottlieb', with whose work he became critically engaged only a short while afterward.<sup>10</sup> The brute calligraphic faceting of pictorial elements in his paintings from 1957/58 certainly evokes links to Kline's gestural 'writing', or

8 Camnitzer 1994, p. 108.

9 Ibid.

10 *Guido Llinás and Los Once After Cuba* 1997, Miami: The Art Museum at Florida International University, p. 11. This catalogue contains valuable essays by Juan Martínez and

perhaps that of Pierre Soulages on the one hand. But, on the other hand, these forceful paintings by Llinás aggressively and even inelegantly give a masonry look to the pictorial building blocks comprising these compelling paintings. Less about the brooding in-between places one sees in works by Martínez, these intensely palpable paintings by Llinás have a matter-of-fact materiality that disperses the coy prettiness of the School of Havana and disbands the poetic indirection of the School of Paris. At once declarative and yet oblique, these two paintings by Llinás embody the negative assertion of how painting can be evocative in its sensory claims on us without being suggestive in sentimental terms.

In subsequent – ‘post-dissident’ – paintings, after he moved to Paris permanently in 1963, Llinás shifted his focus to the pictographic traditions of Torres-García and Gottlieb, along with a related attention given to the Afro-Cuban approach of Wifredo Lam. At other points, the cryptic sign language of pictographs converged in his paintings with the deployment of bald graffiti-like fragments as if his painting aspired to the status of a hybrid visual text. Such was the case only a decade or so ago when Llinás painted his moving elegy *Por Motherwell* of 1992, an oil on canvas (47×47”), shortly after the artist’s death. Llinás’s lifelong admiration for Motherwell’s artworks was also probably linked, at least in part, to Motherwell’s conception of Abstract Expressionism as a form of social protest painting. On this score and others, there was evidently an elective affinity between Motherwell and Llinás, as well as one with Raúl Martínez and Los Once more generally. To quote Motherwell here is to approach in a fundamental way the ideological framework within which the dissident dialogical interchange occurred that allied alienated members of the New York School with their even more discontent counterparts in Havana during the 1950s.

While discussing the New York School, a term he evidently coined, Motherwell wrote as follows about the oppositional stance of himself and many of the other Abstract Expressionists:

It is easier to say some of the things the School of New York is not. Its painting is not interested in giving information, propaganda, description, or anything that might be called (to use words loosely) of practical use ... I think the art of the School of New York, like a great deal of modern art that is called ‘art for art’s sake’, has social implications. These might

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Christoph Singler. See also, *Guido Llinás: Printmaking, 1964–2002* 2003, Lehigh University Art Galleries. It contains an essay about the artist by Alejandro Anreus and an interview with the artist Juan Martínez.

be summarized under the general heading of protest ... The rejection by the School of New York of prevailing ideologies ... the rejection of the lies and falsifications of modern Christian, feudal aristocratic, and bourgeois society, of the property-loving world that the Renaissance expressed, has led us, like many other modern artists, to affinities with the art of other cultures ... Conventional painting [in the West] is a lie ... [and the] modern emphasis on the language of art ... is not merely a matter of internal relations, of the so-called inherent properties of a medium. It is instead a sustained, stubborn, sensitive, and sensible effort to find an exact formulation of attitude toward the world as concretely experienced.<sup>11</sup>

This concerted position of internationalism, with its concomitant opposition to ethnocentrism, was a hallmark of New York School artistic practice, particularly of Motherwell. This stance also explains their early support of the civil rights movement at the beginning of the 1950s, along with their anti-war activism from the mid-1960s onward. (In fact, it was their opposition to the Vietnam War even more than their support of the Civil Rights Movement that caused Motherwell, Rothko, Gottlieb, Reinhardt, et al., to be considered national security threats by the FBI). Such dissident positions, plus the conception of Abstract Expressionism both as a form of social protest and as an expansion of painting's discursive field, help to explain the resonance of Motherwell's artworks elsewhere in Latin America during the 1950s – where dictators enjoyed hegemony based on imperialist military intervention by the United States. This was unquestionably the case with Motherwell's almost epic series of paintings entitled *Elegy to the Spanish Republic*, from 1948 to 1991. The oversized *Elegies* served as a tribute to the democratically elected socialist government of Spain that had been destroyed by fascism in the Civil War from 1936 to 1939. In a subsequent essay along these lines, Motherwell coupled praise for Joan Miró's artworks and socialist politics with a denunciation of 'Franco's gloomy, suppressed Spain'.<sup>12</sup>

Instructively enough, in discussing his *Spanish Elegies*, Motherwell spoke about his own transition from being a fellow traveller of Marxism to being an anarchist. He also illuminated why this imposing series of paintings about the ascent of fascism would be of interest to key artists from contemporary

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11 Motherwell 1992, pp. 77–80.

12 Motherwell 1959, pp. 32–3. For a recent study that carefully traces the US support for Franco and Spanish Fascism, see Viñas 2003. The author rightly notes that, while Hitler helped to put Franco in power in the 1930s, it was the United States, beginning in the 1950s, that kept him in power.

Central America, such as Nicaragua's Armando Morales (b. 1936). Motherwell remarked as follows:

I meant the word 'elegy' in the title. I was twenty-one in 1936, when the Spanish Civil War began ... The Spanish Civil War was even more to my generation than Viet Nam was to be thirty years later to its generation, and should not be forgotten, even though *la guerre est finie*. For years after the series began, I was often mistaken for a Stalinist, though I think the logical political extension ... of extreme modernist individualism, as of native American radicalism, is a kind of anarchism.<sup>13</sup>

Among the artists from Latin America for whom the ideological underpinnings of this series served as a period stimulus, Armando Morales definitely stands out. He is perhaps the most celebrated painter and printmaker ever to come from Nicaragua, if not from all of Central America. In 1959, for example, the young Morales was awarded the Ernst Wolf Prize at the São Paulo Biennial in Brazil for outstanding artwork by an artist from Latin America. Two of his most moving paintings from this period are Abstract Expressionist canvases from 1958, *Guerrillero Muerto #1* (Dead Guerrilla) and *The Electrocuted Prisoner*. Both works were part of a series of over a dozen images that related to the themes of revolutionary insurgency and the martyrdom of revolutionaries.

Revealingly, the striking *Dead Guerrilla* – which is a large canvas, 48 by 80 inches – was obviously linked through a deliberate inter-image dialogue with the elegiac series begun in 1948 and continued throughout the 1950s by Motherwell. An antifascist and anti-imperialist image of undeniable power like those of Motherwell, the painting by Morales features morose and brooding forms configured in megalithic passages of black on a muted and atmospheric white ground. Uninflected by colour accents, these boldly undifferentiated formal configurations are marked both by organic contours and a type of mournful movement in pictorial terms. As is true of Motherwell's related *Spanish Elegies*, the work by Morales depends for its impact visually on a compound modernist surface of maximum area with minimum diversity. As such, the painting is at once formally obtrusive and yet thematically oblique. More a weighty sum of its few parts than any dispersed union of opposites, the work gains in momentum emotionally from this almost imperious pictorial logic. *Dead Guerrilla* also depends strongly on a field of fairly abrupt and almost harsh colour contrasts, featuring an elegiac palette restricted primarily to a deathly foregrounded black, with a muffled white establishing the surrounding ground. The

13 Diamonstein 1979, pp. 244–5.

ideologically inflected visual language of the painting, not any politically illustrated message, is thus how the sensation of mourning martyrs is ultimately articulated as an emotional experience in this commanding protest painting by Morales.

There are at least two significant reasons that Armando Morales, who was an opponent of US-backed military dictator Anastasio Somoza, would have used the *Spanish Elegies* by Motherwell as raw material for his dissenting artistic practice in the 1950s. First, there had been a celebrated case of revolutionary martyrdom in 1956 that rocked the consciousness of the entire country. It happened when the poet Rigoberto López Pérez, fed up with the intense repression as well as corruption in Nicaragua under Somoza, assassinated him at a public ceremony, knowing full well that his actions would then lead to his own immediate death. This sacrifice of his own life to help fight against the Somoza dictatorship – a dictatorship that would continue with full US government backing up through the overthrow of Somoza's second son in 1979 – made López Pérez a national hero to the guerrillas fighting against a regime that was always among the most horrifyingly repressive in the history of the Americas. (After the revolutionary movement led by the Sandinistas, or the FSLN, succeeded in Nicaragua, portraits of López Pérez as one of the nation's three most well-known revolutionary martyrs – along with Augusto César Sandino and Carlos Fonseca – appeared with relative frequency in a Pop Art-like visual language used during the 1980s.)

A second reason that an antifascist like Armando Morales would use Motherwell's elegiac series as a dialogical point of departure for his own painting about martyrdom relates to how Motherwell's work was haunted by the national tragedy in Spain after the victory of Franco and the Falangists in 1939. In fact, one of Morales's favourite professors in Managua at the National School of Fine Arts during the 1940s was Augusto Fernández, a Spanish refugee and former partisan of the socialist government that was destroyed by the victory of fascism. Like thousands of other left-wing partisans, Fernández was forced to flee Spain in order to escape the mass executions that occurred in 1939/40 with the consolidation of Franco's military dictatorship. Even when Armando Morales would make the transition in the 1960s to a type of magical realism that constitutes one of the most outstanding achievements in painting from Latin America over the last three decades, one thing would not change. Morales would return quite impressively to the theme of revolutionary martyrdom in his famous series of paintings and prints about Sandino.<sup>14</sup>

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14 See Craven 1989a, pp. 52–6.

Moreover, I think it is possible to see a notable thread of continuity between the abstract expressionist visual language used by Morales in his 1958 *Dead Guerrilla* and the superb 1990 monumental statue in memory of Sandino by Ernesto Cardenal that dominates the skyline of Managua like a spectre today as a reminder of this tragic past and a warning against its repetition in Nicaragua. Not the statue of a fallen hero, but the stark, megalithic image of how his shadow looms large even after Sandino's demise, this sculpture involves the paradoxical enshrinement of an indexical trace along iconic lines. Other than the identifiable contour of the shadow, there are no other figurative referents illustrating the person to whom the artwork refers. And, like much Abstract Expressionism from both the United States and Latin America (think of the Guido Llinás *Por Motherwell* discussed above), this magisterial sculpture has a strong dialogical link to the graffiti images of Sandino that appeared in the streets of Nicaragua during the final days before the revolutionary overthrow of Somoza III in 1979. Here as elsewhere, the dialogue between fine art and popular culture has notably expanded the discursive field of painting in several directions.

This latter point is equally clear if we recall the use of Jackson Pollock's all-over gestural paintings as a point of departure for several paintings executed in the 1980s by members of the Sandinista Artists Union in revolutionary Nicaragua. In these instances, Pollock's paintings were wedded to popular culture in instructive ways. In the paintings of Sandinista cadres like Boanerges Cerrato and Juan Rivas from the mid-1980s (figure 21), US Abstract Expressionism's potential for articulating dissident ideological values was used to telling effect as a manifestly anti-imperialist visual language during a period of US military intervention under President Ronald Reagan. At once raw material for other artworks from Latin America and also a discursive field capable of expansion in various directions throughout the Americas, this language so deeply associated with US culture was definitely deployed to combat culturally the fact of unwanted imperialist military involvement by the US-backed 'contras'.

Such a tactic would not have been possible had the Abstract Expressionism of Motherwell, Pollock, et al. not been seen by the Sandinistas as a potent signifier for opposition to mainstream culture from the dissident margins of that very same culture. What made Abstract Expressionism so compelling in ideological as well as visual terms was how its language of negativity, its role as abstract 'social protest' against mainstream US culture of the Cold War period, were valued deeply by many artists and intellectuals not only from Cuba and Nicaragua, but also from other countries like Argentina, Columbia, and Peru. One need only recall the outstanding painting *Inkarrrí* by Fernando de Syzlo of Peru – with its clear dialogical interchange involving the paint-

ings of Rothko, even as the title is about insurgent forces among indigenous peoples in that region – to appreciate the broader anti-imperialist reception of Abstract Expressionism throughout ‘nuestra América’. Something similar can be observed about the colour field abstractions of César Paternosto from Argentina, with their interimage dialogue that extends back to pre-Columbian architecture and forward to the zip paintings of Barnett Newman.

This striking reception of Abstract Expressionism from the United States in Latin American hotspots during the Cold War was, of course, intertwined with the political intentions of the practising artists in question. More generally, the reception of Abstract Expressionism in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean (the major exception was Mexico), was confirmed in the critical reception of these regions’ leading art critics. The most celebrated example involves Latin America’s major art critic of this period, namely, Marta Traba from Argentina (and Colombia). In her most acclaimed book, *Dos décadas vulnerables en las artes plásticas latinoamericanas* – which is seen as one of the first great books about modern art criticism from Latin America<sup>15</sup> – she agreed with the reading noted above of Abstract Expressionism’s deeply negative impetus. For her, as for the artists cited above, Abstract Expressionism represented a refutation of the mainstream culture in the United States to which this art was nevertheless connected (which is why US Cold Warriors could attempt, as has been carefully documented by several scholars, to use it as an affirmation of the ‘US Way’).

Conversely, for Traba, Abstract Expressionism embodied a negative visual language on behalf of ‘una dimension interior’ with dissident import and in opposition to ‘una interioridad’ of fetishised subjectivity more characteristic of bourgeois values in the West. She wrote eloquently of how the ‘resistencia crítica’ of ‘la generación de De Kooning (Pollock, Motherwell, Kline, Newman, Rothko)’ was ideologically at odds with mainstream US society.<sup>16</sup> Her argument presupposed a link to the critique of instrumental thought by Herbert Marcuse (whom she admired) and the Frankfurt School. Moreover, Traba contended in her classic study of 1973 what T.J. Clark would later note in 1982, in his critique of Greenberg’s misreading of Abstract Expressionism: ‘The fact of Art, in modernism, is the fact of negation’.<sup>17</sup>

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15 Traba 1973, pp. 3–6.

16 Ibid.

17 Clark 2000, p. 82.



## Postscript. Different Conceptions of Art: An Outline

1. Art as a social bond (through collective labour, shared rituals or political praxis)
2. Art as an anagogical means to a higher understanding (ideals, archetypes, the sublime) First articulated by Socrates in Plato's dialogue *The Symposium*
3. Art as a reflection of the soul (Plotinus's Neo-Platonism or Dorian Gray)
4. Art as a glimpse of 'the divine order' (Abbot Suger and Gothic Architecture)
5. Art as a 'window onto the natural world' (L.B. Alberti in *Della Pintura*, 1435)
6. Art as a 'mirror of reality' (Classical Greece, according to Pliny; Renaissance)
7. Art as the revelation of 'poetic truth' or *ut picture poesis* (Aristotle in *Ars Poetica*)
8. Art as the reflection of the 'divine right of the kings' (James I and Louis XIV, et. al.)
9. Art as a way of combatting boredom for the leisure classes (Abbot Dubois)
10. Art as the expression of human dignity (Sixteenth-century Humanism)
11. Art as a form of education about the social good (Diderot the Enlightenment)
12. Art as an ideological force on behalf of social change (French Revolution, etc.)
13. Art as a 'restrained representation of the colonial order' (Colonial Period Art)
14. Art as the expression of 'purposeless purpose' (Kant)
15. Art as a form of social critique (Jacques Louis David & Goya)
16. Art as the 'perfect expression of an imperfect individual' (Romantic Period)
17. Art as the expression of 'the greatest number of the greatest ideas' (John Ruskin)
18. Art as the expression or reflection 'of the times' (Hegel on art and its *Zeitgeist*)
19. Art as a form of negation, a negation of egotism (Schopenhauer)

20. Art as a means for refining the senses, thus of reconstructing the subject (Marx)
21. Art as a means of human self-realisation (Marx)
22. Art as a form of disalienated labour (Marx & William Morris)
23. Art as a way of disclosing historical alienation from society (Engels)
24. Art as a form of affirmation – of life (Nietzsche)
25. Art as its own end or art for art's sake (Whistler & Oscar Wilde)
26. Art as a superior form of seeing in a process without any end (Cézanne)
27. Art as an invitation to meditation without any predetermined object of mediation (Gauguin)
28. Art as an existential expression of the 'human condition' (Existentialist philosophy)
29. Art as a form of consolation for bruises of life (Matisse)
30. Art as an expression of the 'dual nature of art's relation to life' (Roger Fry)
31. Art as a visual language (Heinrich Wöfflin & Rosalind Krauss)
32. Art as a hammer (Russian Constructivism, Trotsky, Bertolt Brecht)
33. Art as a weapon (Diego Rivera & Pablo Picasso)
34. Art as a form of historical cognition (Panofsky & Lukács)
35. Art as the embodiment of psychological development (Arnheim & Gestalt Psychology)
36. Art as mechanical reproduction (Walter Benjamin)
37. Art as a system of signs, whether iconic, indexical, or symbolic (C.S. Peirce)
38. Art as the sublimation of instinctual or unconscious desire (Freud)
39. Art as the de-sublimation of anti-social desires (Surrealism)
40. Art as a form of dialogical interchange within society (Bakhtin, Paulo Freire)
41. Art as a form of institutional caprice or validation (Marcel Duchamp, et. al.)
42. Art as a 'dehumanised' form or medium of self-expression (José Ortega y Gasset & Clement Greenberg)
43. Art as a discursive field (Claude Lévi-Strauss & Michel Foucault)
44. Art as a form of utopian projection (Ernst Bloch, Herbert Marcuse, Alberto Hjar)
45. Art as a storehouse of possibilities awaiting release (Max Raphael & John Berger)
46. Art as product of the 'culture industry' (Adorno & Horkheimer)
47. Art as a 'negative dialectic' that resists resignation to the status quo (Adorno)

48. Art as institutional critique, as the critique of institutions (Haacke & Buren)
49. Art as a ticket to personal fame (Jeff Koons)
50. Art as a construction of the subject in gender, ethnic or national terms (Feminism)
51. Art as the therapeutic restoration of life (Donald Kuspit)
52. Art as redemption (Dave Hickey)



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